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# Women, peace and security: The United Nations Women's conferences and Security Council Resolution 1325

In December 1987, the US warship USS *Missouri* had an open day for the public while it was docked in Sydney Harbour. Barbara Meyer, otherwise known as Bobi, went on board with the crowd. Unbeknown to those around her, Meyer was not an ordinary warship visitor. Underneath her clothes her body was covered in paint: 'NO NUKE SHIPS' had been written on her legs and, with the help of a friend, 'GREENHAM GRANNIES AGAINST THE NUKES' was printed on her back above her bra. On her upper chest was a peace sign.<sup>1</sup> Climbing aboard the warship, Meyer chose a prominent site on the upper deck and 'swallowing her misgivings, took off her dress'.<sup>2</sup> While shocked onlookers and sailors gathered around, unsure of how to react, she gave a '20 minute anti-nuclear speech' in her underwear.<sup>3</sup> Police eventually arrived, covering her with a blanket and escorting her from the ship, but not before hundreds saw her anti-war message where she discussed being a mother of eight and a grandmother of five. The media delighted in the story, *The Canberra Times* leading with the headline 'Granny Strips'.<sup>4</sup>

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1 'Vale—Barbara (Bobi) Meyer ACT Branch', *Peace and Freedom* 52, Issues 1 and 2 (April 2013), 13.

2 'Vale—Barbara (Bobi) Meyer ACT Branch', *Peace and Freedom* 52, Issues 1 and 2 (April 2013), 13.

3 'Granny Strips, Two Men Arrested in N-Protests', *The Canberra Times*, 28 December 1987, 3.

4 'Granny Strips, Two Men Arrested in N-Protests', *The Canberra Times*, 28 December 1987, 3.

Older members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) were dedicated members of the anti-war movement in Australia, often attracting surprised reactions when they attended protests. Those defying stereotypes and breaking conventions frequently drew the attention of the media. New South Wales member Launa Gilmour noted in a media interview how 'photographers always go straight for my sister, who is in her 80s. Her age apparently lends some authority'.<sup>5</sup> Individual members continued to stage creative and personal protests to gain media attention for their anti-war agenda, even as the structure of WILPF became more focused on lobbying at international forums. It remained one of WILPF's strengths that they were able to combine the local and personal aspects of grassroots activism with international and political action. The 1980s were a productive period for WILPF in Australia. A new ACT branch created in 1982 brought a significant increase in membership, and peace groups across the country were energised by large nuclear disarmament and Palm Sunday rallies in all major cities.<sup>6</sup> It seemed, according to one journalist, that since the women's liberation movement 'offered ordinary women the confidence to speak up', women 'not only held their own within the movement, but have also taken control of it'.<sup>7</sup> Gilmour herself believed the rapid increase in WILPF membership was partly 'a rebellion against a world run by men'.<sup>8</sup> A greater number of members were working but still found time for volunteering, which Gilmour believed reflected a particularly feminine engagement with politics; 'unlike men, women make time for everything'.<sup>9</sup>

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The year 1975 was declared International Women's Year by the United Nations (UN). It was followed by a 'Decade for Women' where an official conference was planned every five years, first in Mexico City (1975), then Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985), with a follow up conference in Beijing (1995).<sup>10</sup> Three themes were chosen to structure the first conference:

5 'Peace? It's Up to the Women', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1984.

6 Australian Section report, '22nd International Congress of WILPF "Women Save the World"' Sweden, 1983, accessed through database edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, *Women and Social Movements, International—1840 to Present*, 42.

7 'Peace? It's Up to the Women', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1984.

8 'Peace? It's Up to the Women', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1984.

9 'Peace? It's Up to the Women', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1984.

10 For more on IWY see: Jocelyn Olcott, 'Globalizing Sisterhood' in *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, ed. Niall Ferguson et al., (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 281–93, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrs8zfp.21; and Roland Burke, 'Competing for the Last Utopia? The NIEO, Human Rights, and the World Conference for the International Women's Year, Mexico City, June 1975', *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015), doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0000.

equality, development and peace. The influences of new women's groups and the UN Decade of Women set the tone for WILPF in the 1970s and 1980s, with members committed to highlighting the peace pillar within a growing network of women's advocacy groups and organisations focused on international action.

WILPF's strength was often seen to lie in its reputation as a grassroots organisation with widespread membership. Its engagement with the UN Decade for Women and the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 saw a new dual identity emerge as it started to modernise into a professional non-government organisation (NGO), integrating with the UN lobbying structure. WILPF centralised its focus on lobbying the UN and other international bodies, with the New York office becoming fundamental to the international section. In the 1990s the staff of the New York office took a leadership role in lobbying for the passing of Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 on women, peace and security, which became a watershed moment for the movement. National branches then began a campaign to pressure governments to create National Action Plans for local implementation of 1325 goals, all the while continuing to promote feminist foreign policy priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Trying to promote the peace agenda at the Decade for Women conferences was not always easy or straightforward, despite peace being a stated theme. The limited discussion of peace and conflict was highly politicised, not least as a result of a resolution that equated Zionism with racism, which caused countries that were supportive of Israel to abstain from voting for the various plans of action.<sup>12</sup> At the 1980 conference in Copenhagen, for example, Australia voted against the whole plan of action due to the use of the word Zionism. The focus on the Arab–Israeli conflict, the discussion of liberation groups during the era of decolonisation and problems of economic development created a complex political environment. WILPF members also debated the need to work with groups like the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) who many felt were supportive of violence in liberation struggles. Like the generations of WILPF women that had

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11 Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Feminist Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199845231.001.0001.

12 Kristen Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women: Brief Reflections on Feminism, Capitalism and Cold War Politics in the Early Years of the International Women's Movement', *Women's Studies International Forum* 33, no. 1 (January 2010): 6, doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.11.008.

come before them, they were concerned about any action that might contradict or erode their commitment to nonviolence. Their passion and determination had endured: WILPF Australia's involvement in the UN Decade for Women conferences and their role in campaigns during the 1990s played an important role in the SCR 1325 being passed by the UN.

The peace agenda at the UN women's conferences has sometimes been dismissed by anti-communist critics as Cold War propaganda. Indeed, the political momentum for the UN to host the conferences emerged from Cold War rivalries, and the 'peace' pillar was for many a 'catch-all term used for issues that the United States delegation preferred to keep off the agenda, such as nuclear disarmament, apartheid, racial discrimination, and national sovereignty'.<sup>13</sup> Some critics thought the conferences fatally divided between the 'first world' feminist priorities of equality versus 'third world' issues of development.<sup>14</sup> The entire decade was politically turbulent, with national governments often limiting delegation and individual participation and the international media portraying the conferences as chaotic. Yet WILPF continued to participate, hoping to advance their cause without being mistaken as communist sympathisers. Their efforts nevertheless were seen by some to have been coopted by anti-Western initiatives. WILPF's participation was nonetheless distinctive in its attachment to nonviolent methods. One WILPF Australia member took stock after the 1975 conference, realising: 'We are in the midst of a period of violent social change without a clear policy on how we, who believe in nonviolent change, fit in to the picture.'<sup>15</sup> WILPF women were confronted by the violence of national liberation movements and often found themselves trying to articulate a position denouncing violence in an arena where many approved of conflict if used in struggles against oppression.

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13 Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195327687.001.0001.

14 Olcott, *International Women's Year*. See also Challen Nicklen, 'Rhetorics of Connection in the United Nations Conferences on Women, 1975–1995' (PhD thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2008).

15 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 11 March 1976, Box 53/4 WILPF, SCPC, University of Colorado at Boulder Archives (CU Archives).

## 1975 Mexico City Conference and the Arab–Israeli Conflict

In 1975, Elizabeth Reid, as the Australian prime minister's adviser on women's affairs, organised the 'Women in Politics Conference' to discuss theoretical and practical issues facing women interested in getting involved in Australian politics. It was International Women's Year (IWY) and the credibility given to the women's movement by increased funding provided by the Whitlam Government made the conference a significant part of government business. The atmosphere was electric. Irene Greenwood, a prominent member of the WILPF in Australia, was appointed by Reid to the advisory committee of the government's IWY program.<sup>16</sup> As a stalwart of the women's movement, introduced at a young age into feminist activism in Western Australia by her mother, Mary Driver, a noted activist of her time, Greenwood's knowledge of the movement before the burst of activity in 1975 was something the women's liberation movement (WLM) sorely needed.<sup>17</sup> Speaking as a keynote at the conference in Canberra, 76-year-old Greenwood encapsulated the excitement of the year and praised the energy of the movement: 'whether we like it or not, I think the lid's off and the steam's out from what I can judge from here today'.<sup>18</sup> Greenwood recognised the significance of the moment. Even so, she was not afraid to put young feminists in their place when it came to their lack of interest in a feminist legacy they had mainly failed to discover. 'I am amazed', she declared:

to find the young women of this new women's liberation movement totally unaware of the fact that there were women who protested, women who struggled, women who marched, that there were women who accepted the very same principles as they are accepting and advocated them sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, a hundred years ago.<sup>19</sup>

Greenwood proceeded to share memories from her own long career in women's activism and broadcasting in Australia in an attempt to counter assumptions widely held by younger women activists that their predecessors were 'slow', or 'didn't appreciate' the vote they were 'given'. Critics had often

16 Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political, and the Making of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019), 113.

17 Mary Driver profile, Daphne Popham, *Reflections: Profiles of 150 Women who helped make Western Australia's History* (Carroll's Pty Ltd, 1978), 64.

18 Irene Greenwood, 'A Lifetime of Political Activity', in *Women and Politics Conference Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1977), 58.

19 Greenwood, 'A Lifetime of Political Activity', *Women and Politics Conference Volume 1*, 58.

pointed to the underrepresentation of women in parliament as proof of women's apathy.<sup>20</sup> She countered: 'And so they think we weren't working. We were working but you see there were many things working against us.'<sup>21</sup> Her call for greater historical understanding represented one of the core functions of the activities of WILPF over the life of the organisation from its founding in 1915: to educate people about social change and the activities of those working towards peace instead of war, and to change the way we understand history. She positioned the women's movement within a longer historical narrative, questioning what it is we remember and commemorate, and why.

The number of international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations dramatically increased over a short period of time, from 2,795 NGOs in 1972 to 12,686 by 1984.<sup>22</sup> It was a development that transformed the international political arena. The Whitlam Government was active in engaging with international political framework. Whitlam renewed Australia's commitment to internationalism by entering into over 133 international treaties in just three years and used international legal commitments as a way of expanding federal government power.<sup>23</sup> Whitlam was eager to involve Australian society in the UN Decade for Women. The government had appointed Reid as the first women's adviser, and to celebrate IWY, it allocated over two million dollars of funding towards grants for events and projects.<sup>24</sup>

Reid had the difficult job of bringing together the various sections of the women's movement during the year and, despite her efforts, the International Women's Year National Advisory Committee was criticised by the mainstream media and sections of the movement itself. The media represented IWY as 'feminism as excess, equated with the extravagance attributed to the Whitlam government in general'.<sup>25</sup> Women's liberation activists such as Mavis Robertson criticised the allocation of funding for not being feminist enough and prioritising non-feminist proposals over WLM

20 Greenwood, 'A Lifetime of Political Activity', *Women and Politics Conference Volume 1*, 61.

21 Greenwood, 'A Lifetime of Political Activity', *Women and Politics Conference Volume 1*, 61.

22 Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 129, doi.org/10.1525/9780520936126.

23 Michael Kirby, 'Whitlam as Internationalist: A Centenary Reflection', *Melbourne University Law Review*, 39 (2016): 850, accessed 3 November 2022, law.unimelb.edu.au/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0012/2061021/04-Kirby.pdf, 3.

24 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 258.

25 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 259.

projects.<sup>26</sup> WILPF members were also disappointed, noting how peace was constantly dropped from the agenda. While pleased that IWY events were well attended and 'spectacular', WILPF remained worried that 'nothing is ever said by anyone except us about the third objective, namely peace. So that is what we are concentrating on'.<sup>27</sup>

WILPF women decided to put their energy towards the conference planned by the UN for IWY in Mexico City. Unable to have many observers at the main UN event, WILPF's main arena of engagement was through the Tribune satellite conference organised for the many NGOs that arrived to participate in the women's conference. The Tribune hosted over 6,000 women and was open to 'any woman who could get there and wanted to have her say'.<sup>28</sup> Both the official conference and the satellite conferences were considered lively and controversial, and represented the 'NGO-ization of activism, particularly transnational women's activism'.<sup>29</sup> The media characterised the official conference as being dominated by 'wives of Prime Ministers and Presidents', dubbed 'wifey-poos', and the Tribune conference as being disruptive and divisive.<sup>30</sup> Feminists Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer wrote about their experiences of both the UN conference and the Tribune, criticising the national delegations for promoting national interests rather than engaging in a genuine discussion of sexism and its impacts on worldwide gender equality.<sup>31</sup> Reid, representing Australia at the official proceedings and leading an official delegation that included Margaret Whitlam, was among the few delegates to confront directly issues such as sexism. She decried the focus on women as 'instruments' for national goals rather than acknowledging them as people in their own right.<sup>32</sup>

26 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 259.

27 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 14 March, 1975, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

28 Philippa Day Benson, 'Looking to Australia for a Lead in Women's Policies', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 July 1975, 4–5.

29 Jocelyn Olcott, 'Globalizing Sisterhood', in Ferguson, *The Shock of the Global*, 287.

30 Day Benson, 'Looking to Australia for a Lead in Women's Policies', 4–5.

31 Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1977), 343; Germaine Greer, *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 200.

32 'Australia Wants Changes in Plan', and 'Ms Reid Hits Back' in *Xilonen*, Mexico City, 24 June 1975. See also Elizabeth Reid, 'Between the Official Lines', *Ms. Magazine*, November 1975.



**Evelyn Rothfield, 'Handcrafts of All Nations' exhibition, Melbourne, December 1956.**

Over forty nations sent exhibits to Australia for a 'Handcrafts of All Nations' exhibition held in Melbourne in December. It was organised by the All Nations Cultural Centre which aims to establish contact on all cultural levels between people of all nations — the Secretary of the All Nations Cultural Centre, Mrs Evelyn Rothfield, arranging the Pakistani exhibit at the exhibition. The Pakistani Government sent all the exhibits.

Source: Photographer J. Fitzpatrick. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1501, A470/1. See Appendix for a short biography of Evelyn Rothfield.



Australian WILPF president Evelyn Rothfield organised a delegation of 35 Australian women to attend the satellite Tribune conference.<sup>33</sup> Women from NGOs were given grants to travel to the Tribune conference, including feminist and labour movement activist Edna Ryan, Aboriginal rights activist Pat Eatock, and President of the National Council of Women Australia Joyce McConnell.<sup>34</sup> Rothfield felt buoyed by the conference, stating: 'I really think we hadn't realised the extent of the anger and frustration of the women of the world. Something very positive has come out of this.'<sup>35</sup> Yet, at the same time, Rothfield felt disappointed by the reluctance of attendees at the UN conference and the Tribune to focus on the 'peace' pillar.<sup>36</sup> International general secretary of WILPF Edith Ballantyne worked alongside Rothfield to organise a 'peace caucus' that released a statement pushing for the UN to convene a world disarmament conference, but they were told that 'such matters would unnecessarily "politicize" the decade'.<sup>37</sup>

The one occasion when peace was raised did indeed become highly divisive and politicised. Leah Rabin, delegate from Israel and wife of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, was giving a speech to the UN conference when many delegations participated in a coordinated 'walk out' which was widely covered by the press.<sup>38</sup> Rabin said as the walkout occurred: 'countries may have their differences and their misunderstandings, but not to sit down and listen to each other is to miss the point of being here'.<sup>39</sup> Jahan el-Helou, attending from Palestine, responded when asked about the speech by reporters of the conference newspaper *Xilonen*: 'we will sit down with Jews, but not with Zionists and imperialists'.<sup>40</sup> The equating of Zionism with racism and imperialism was controversial and disruptive, characterised as a way to mount the 'soviet agenda' of criticising US foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> In the final world action plan, Zionism was inserted into a resolution about Palestinian and Arab women:

33 Rothfield, quoted in Day Benson, 'Looking to Australia for a Lead in Women's Policies', 4–5.

34 Department of Foreign Affairs, 'World Conference for International Women's Year', news release no. 137, 17 June 1975, accessed 12 December 2022, [parlinfo.aph.gov.au/](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/).

35 Department of Foreign Affairs, 'World Conference for International Women's Year', news release no. 137, 17 June 1975, accessed 12 December 2022, [parlinfo.aph.gov.au/](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/).

36 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 18 July 1975, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

37 Catherine Foster, *Women for All Seasons: The Story of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 76.

38 'Walkout Staged on Israel', *Xilonen*, Mexico City, 25 June 1975.

39 'Walkout Staged on Israel', *Xilonen*, Mexico City, 25 June 1975.

40 'Walkout Staged on Israel', *Xilonen*, Mexico City, 25 June 1975.

41 Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 6.

The World Conference of the International Women's Year ... Considering that international cooperation and peace require national independence and liberation, the elimination of colonialism, neo-colonialism, fascism, Zionism, apartheid and foreign occupation, alien domination and racial discrimination in all its forms and also respect for human rights ... Appeals to all states and international organisations to extend assistance—moral and material—to the Palestinian and Arab women and people in their struggle against Zionism.<sup>42</sup>

Eighty-nine countries voted in favour of the document, three opposed and eighteen abstained.<sup>43</sup> The Australian delegation voted in favour of the plan, despite the resolution, because they agreed with everything else in the declaration. Other delegations who voted no to the declaration, such the US, Israel and Denmark, were shocked. The Declaration on the Equality of Women document became the first international document to label Zionism as racism. For US feminist Betty Friedan, who had previously had little interest in Zionism, this incident motivated her to become 'suddenly dedicated to the Zionist cause'.<sup>44</sup> She lamented, however, that the issue had become a 'scapegoat' to blame for the decade's failures and was the 'prevention of real action on women's rights'.<sup>45</sup> Discussing the conflict was one of the few ways in which the conference intended to advance the 'peace' plank of the agenda. But, rather than advancing the peace cause, it deepened divisions and depleted the goodwill required for interpersonal solidarity within the women's movement.

Evelyn Rothfield, as a non-governmental delegate, tried to persuade the Australian delegation to abstain and made her views known to Reid after the conference. '[W]hy single out Zionism?' she asked, encouraging Reid to take a 'more principled stand'.<sup>46</sup> Rothfield was angry. In a letter to Ballantyne she admitted that the 'deliberate singling out of Israel for attack at international forums is becoming an issue of great anxiety to me'.<sup>47</sup> A progressive woman and activist in the Jewish community, experienced in advocating for peace

42 Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City 19 June – 2 July 1975 (New York: United Nations publications, 1976), Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 110.

43 Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 6.

44 Gil Troy, *Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85.

45 Troy, *Moynihan's Moment*, 85.

46 Rothfield to Reid, 21 July 1975 reproduced in Evelyn Rothfield, *The Future Is Past* (self-published: Copy available at the State Library of Victoria, 1992), 65.

47 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 18 July, 1975, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

in the Middle East, Rothfield did not identify as a Zionist, but the emotive debate at the Mexico City conference made her angry enough to consider doing so.<sup>48</sup>

Evelyn Rothfield and her husband Norman had migrated to Australia from England in 1939.<sup>49</sup> Both were heavily involved in progressive causes and the peace movement through their engagement in the Australian Peace Council (APC) and its successor organisations. Norman Rothfield helped established the Australian Jewish Peace Movement in 1952 and was a delegate to the Vienna Peace Assembly.<sup>50</sup> A mother of three children, herself from a Jewish family, Evelyn had many cultural and personal connections to Europe and to the future of Israel. She first visited Palestine in 1947 and subsequently 'visited Israel more times than I can count'.<sup>51</sup> On her many travels, Rothfield wrote for Australian newspapers such as the *Argus* as a correspondent reporting on the UN.<sup>52</sup> She then published two small booklets about Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. *Whither Palestine*, published in March 1947, detailed the history of Jews in Palestine while *Israel Reborn* was published after the UN declaration in November 1947 partitioning Palestine between Jews and Arabs and providing for the formation of Israel as a Jewish state the following year.<sup>53</sup> These two works detailed Evelyn's position on the creation of Israel and her belief that peace between the two parties in conflict could be achieved through recognition, understanding and 'good neighbourliness'.<sup>54</sup>

The Australian section of WILPF supported the UN decision in 1947 to create the state of Israel. Doris Blackburn was a prominent signatory to a pamphlet called *Australia and Israel* (1948) written by Brian Fitzpatrick, a prominent historian, journalist, civil libertarian and socialist, which encouraged people to 'ask their government to give official recognition to Israel's government'.<sup>55</sup> By the 1970s Rothfield had many family connections in Israel, which gave a personal dimension to reports of conflict. While she was critical of many of Israel's aggressive policies towards the Palestinians,

48 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 18 July, 1975, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

49 Rothfield, *The Future Is Past*, 25. See biography in the Appendix.

50 Philip Mendes, *The New Left, the Jews and the Vietnam War, 1965–1972* (North Caulfield, Vic: Lazare, 1993), 18.

51 Rothfield, *The Future Is Past*, 55.

52 For example see: Evelyn Rothfield, 'Australian Girls at UN', *The Argus*, 18 October 1949.

53 Evelyn Rothfield, *Israel Reborn* (Melbourne: Dolphin Publications, 1948); Evelyn Rothfield, *Whither Palestine* (Melbourne: Dolphin Publications, 1947).

54 Rothfield, *Israel Reborn*, 2.

55 Brian Fitzpatrick, *Australia and Israel* (Melbourne: July 1948), NLA.

she also remained sensitive towards what she saw as disproportionate scrutiny of Israel from the left which she felt was 'motivated purely and simply by expediency and morality and justice, as usual, have very little to do with it'.<sup>56</sup>

The Rothfields were widely recognised for their contribution to promoting peace and discussion of human rights in Australia. In 1984 they were involved in the founding of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society (AJDS) which aimed to be 'a progressive voice among Jews and a Jewish voice among progressives'.<sup>57</sup> *Paths to Peace*, the journal they jointly published about the Middle East conflict, was awarded a United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) peace media prize in 1979, an award which was established by Stella Cornelius, another prominent WILPF member.<sup>58</sup> The ceremony was held in Sydney and Yehudi Menuhin, an internationally renowned violinist and brother to Hephzibah Menuhin, president of WILPF UK, distributed the award, with another going to Australian WILPF for their journal *Peace and Freedom*. Recognition did not end there. In 1998, Norman and Evelyn were both awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for 'service to the promotion of peace and human rights in Australia and internationally'.<sup>59</sup>

Evelyn Rothfield shared with Libby Frank, a US Jewish member of WILPF, in the belief that discussion over the nature of Zionism distracted from the search for peaceful solutions. The resolutions by the UN conference equating Zionism with racism were simply 'used as politically expedient tools by "the most hawkish and intransigent of the Israelis and the Americans" and by Arab regimes' to rally people to causes and further accentuate the 'us and them' divide in the Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

56 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 21 November 1973, series III reel 55, WILPF International Papers 1915–1978, Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America, c 1983, accessed at the National Library of Australia (NLA). Hereafter referred to as WILPF Papers.

57 Australian Jewish Democratic Society, accessed 3 November 2022, [www.ajds.org.au](http://www.ajds.org.au). For more information about the Rothfields' involvement, their son Robin Rothfield was interviewed for an oral history project, see: 'AJDS Oral History Project: Interview with Robin Rothfield 01/05/2014', Mixcloud, accessed 17 October 2015, [www.mixcloud.com/AJDS/ajds-oral-history-project-interview-with-robin-rothfield-01052014](http://www.mixcloud.com/AJDS/ajds-oral-history-project-interview-with-robin-rothfield-01052014).

58 Norman Rothfield, *Many Paths to Peace: The Political Memoirs of Norman Rothfield* (Melbourne: Yarraford, 1997), 141.

59 Evelyn Rothfield OAM, 26 January 1998, accessed 3 November 2022, [honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/882176](http://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/882176).

60 Catia Cecilia Confortini, 'How Matters: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's Trips to the Middle East, 1931–1975', *Peace & Change* 38, no. 3 (1 July 2013): 301, doi.org/10.1111/pech.12023.



**Stella Cornelius of the International Year of Peace Secretariat completes the chain of 10,000 peace banners, 30 March 1986.**

Source: Photographer Brendan Read, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. Photos, Fairfax Media Archives. See Appendix for a short biography of Stella Cornelius.

WILPF International's position on this issue changed profoundly from its founding to the 1970s. In her work on the history of WILPF, Catia Confortini has detailed the evolution of policy on the Middle East and demonstrated how various missions to the region by WILPF members informed the organisation's policy direction.<sup>61</sup> Fact-finding missions to conflict areas had a long tradition. WILPF did not rely blindly on media or government reports when formulating policy, often attempting to understand issues on the ground for themselves and obtain information unfiltered by media and governments. The first mission to the Middle East occurred in 1931 when Swedish member Elisabeth Waern-Bugge travelled to Palestine at a time when WILPF had a large Jewish constituency and few national sections outside of Europe.<sup>62</sup> Colonial authorities sympathetic to the Jewish population of Palestine facilitated the trip and her report detailed a position influenced by the Zionist narrative. After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the official position of WILPF reproduced ideas

61 Confortini, 'How Matters'.

62 Confortini, 'How Matters', 287.

of 'hateful and belligerent Arab enemies surrounding a weak new state', and juxtaposed Israel's 'pioneering and technologically innovative spirit with Arab backwardness'.<sup>63</sup>

In 1958 Haitian WILPF member Madeleine Boucherau again travelled to the Middle East and reported on the situation. She offered a more balanced interpretation of the conflict, making clear that in certain cases Israel had misappropriated Palestinian land and calling for a return to the partition plan. She made contacts in the region that eventually led to the creation of the Lebanese section of WILPF in 1962, which changed the dynamics of discussions on the conflict.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, as Confortini has argued, WILPF still 'unquestioningly reproduced the myth of pre-Israel Palestine as a sparsely populated area, which the Israeli transformed into fertile land'.<sup>65</sup> WILPF delegates travelled once more to the region in 1967, but it was not until the 1975 Middle East mission that the organisation officially changed its policy on the nature and root cause of the conflict. The political context of the conflict had changed. By 1974 Yasser Arafat had appeared before the UN General Assembly to present his famous 'olive branch' speech which aligned the Palestinian struggle with decolonisation movements. Then, in 1975, the US State Department acknowledged Palestinians' claims. Libby Frank and Edith Ballantyne travelled on the 1975 WILPF mission and wrote a report that contrasted with previous ones in its recognition of more similarities than differences between Arab and Jewish women.<sup>66</sup>

Following on from the report, Frank and Ballantyne hosted a workshop for the International Executive Committee of WILPF to create a new official policy statement. Not all sections were happy with this change in direction. Ballantyne felt the WILPF section in Israel had 'turned the section into a propagandistic arm of the Israeli government'.<sup>67</sup> These discussions precipitated a rupture with the Israeli section which led to its disbanding after 1975. The new statement recognised self-determination for both Palestinian and Jewish communities and condemned the militarisation of the region. Frank acknowledged that the new, more balanced position led several WILPF members to leave the organisation but organising in the area soon returned when the Israeli section reformed in 1982. Only a few years later, in 1989, a Palestinian section was formed.<sup>68</sup>

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63 Confortini, 'How Matters', 291.

64 Confortini, 'How Matters', 291.

65 Confortini, 'How Matters', 291.

66 Confortini, 'How Matters', 298.

67 Confortini, 'How Matters', 302.

68 Confortini, 'How Matters', 303.

Rothfield remained a member of WILPF and supported the new position which closely aligned with her own personal view on the conflict and its resolution. As friends, Ballantyne and Rothfield often debated and disagreed over various aspects of the conflict—just as the organisation continued to do in an effort to try and reach a consensus. Rothfield was insistent, however, that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) should recognise Israel before any peaceful negotiations could commence.<sup>69</sup> In 1979 Rothfield and her husband visited Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Israel as part of a tour organised by the Australian Institute of International Affairs.<sup>70</sup> At a meeting with Yasser Arafat in Damascus, the Rothfields made a point of asking if the PLO would recognise Israel. Norman wrote:

I asked him, if Menachem Begin recognised a Palestinian state in part of Palestine, would he, Yasser Arafat, recognise Israel and agree to make peace? He replied with the question 'Has Begin made any such offer?' At this, Evelyn immediately called out from the back of the room, 'You're just like a Jew; you answer one question with another.' Arafat was a bit stunned at this. As for me I nearly fell through the floor.<sup>71</sup>

On the one hand, Rothfield felt she had a lot of support from within the British, French and Scandinavian sections of WILPF for her position on the conflict. On the other, she 'got a lot of flack from the Americans and their allies' and realised that she was a 'thorn in the side of many in WILPF'.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless she remained active in monitoring and critiquing WILPF's positions on world affairs. In 1987 she wrote to the US publication of *Peace and Freedom* requesting to be taken off the mailing list because of their coverage of a meeting between WILPF and Soviet women, which she felt lacked the 'slightest criticism of anything done by the Soviet Union'.

If you cannot convince them of the errors of their government, in the same way that they convince you of the errors of yours, it is all rather a waste of time and not contributing to the peace *with freedom*, to which we all aspire.<sup>73</sup>

69 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 11 April, 1974 Box 53/4 WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

70 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 13 February 1979, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

71 Rothfield, *Many Paths to Peace*, 107.

72 Rothfield, *The Future Is Past*, 59.

73 Evelyn Rothfield, 'WILPF and the USSR Letter to the Editor', *Peace and Freedom* 47, no. 4 (June 1987), 4.



## 1980 Copenhagen, WILPF as an NGO

By the time of the UN conference in Copenhagen in 1980, the Australian section of WILPF had elected Erika Rathgeber as president with Elizabeth Mattick as secretary. Rathgeber (née Regener) was married to the physicist Henri Rathgeber and had migrated to Australia from Germany. Both she and her husband had mothers who had been involved in the founding of WILPF in Europe.<sup>74</sup> Rothfield became international vice-president of WILPF from 1980 to 1983. Around this time, the Queensland branch was increasing its activity with Heather Williams becoming a regular correspondent with Geneva. The Australian section inaugurated the Junior Media Peace Prize in 1980 that aimed at encouraging youth interest in peace research. The national body also decided to highlight the 'position of Aboriginal children in Australia' as a special project for the International Year of the Child in 1979 and prepared a detailed submission to the prime minister.<sup>75</sup>

In 1979 Edith Ballantyne from the Geneva office was elected to head the UN Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations. This made WILPF central in setting the agenda for the NGO forum that ran alongside the 1980 UN Copenhagen Women's conference.<sup>76</sup> WILPF was better prepared and organised than in 1975, and were far more satisfied with the amount of discussion peace received on the agenda. The NGO forum had over 8,000 registered participants. WILPF organised 11 workshops on peace, which were 'extremely well attended'.<sup>77</sup> Those WILPF members attending the forum felt that the event gave them hope that the trend of peace being left to the 'politicians and experts' was being reversed.<sup>78</sup> Rathgeber led the Australians at the NGO forum and was a WILPF observer to the UN conference. At the official UN conference, however, the issue of Zionism once again threatened to derail the proceedings. An item on Palestinian women and refugees was put on the agenda months before and made most national delegations anxious about the politicisation of the conference.<sup>79</sup>

74 WILPF Bulletin, report on the 70th Birthday Party of WILPF, 27 April 1985, Box 54/1 WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

75 Rothfield to Ballantyne, 13 February 1979, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives. See also WILPF Australian Section, 'Open Submission to the Prime Minister, Education—Health—Housing of Aboriginal Children, A Blueprint for the 1980s', Box 54/1, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

76 Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, 77.

77 'What Happened in Copenhagen', *Pax et Libertas* 45, no. 3 September 1980.

78 'What Happened in Copenhagen', *Pax et Libertas* 45, no. 3 September 1980.

79 Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 6.



Members of the National Women's Advisory Council (NWAC), established by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, led the official Australian delegation to the UN conference.<sup>80</sup> There they initiated a resolution on women and development assistance programs and co-sponsored resolutions on 'battered women'.<sup>81</sup> In a resolution recognising the root causes of women's disadvantage, and which listed a number of 'isms' (including Zionism, along with racism, neo-colonialism and imperialism), the Australian delegation attempted to have the word 'sexism' added, reprising their efforts at Mexico City. It sparked an intense debate with many countries claiming sexism did not exist. The Soviet Union claimed that sexism was 'such a foreign concept that there was no word for it in the Russian language'.<sup>82</sup> The word was finally placed in a footnote to the final plan of action. Despite Australia's serious engagement with the program, when the final vote came on the document, Australia voted against it along with the US, Canada and Israel. This was a decision by politicians at home rather than the delegation itself who were forced to vote against the plan of action because of the references to Zionism. WILPF thought the action by the four countries was 'a shocker'.<sup>83</sup> They hoped that nations would 'nevertheless apply the provisions' since the sections of concern were so small. Ballantyne wrote:

I cannot believe that the women will allow them not to implement the major part of the programme even if they won't touch the measures of assistance to Palestinian women ... The Australian women have certainly work before them.<sup>84</sup>

For WILPF internationally, leading the NGO forum created new contacts and resulted in the creation of two new sections, one in French Polynesia and another in the Netherlands which was a revival of an older section that had previously folded.<sup>85</sup> It also cemented WILPF's emerging identity as a major NGO at the UN. However, despite WILPF's 1971 policy change which 'accepted that oppressed people feel a need for revolution', members still withheld approval of violence in these international forums.<sup>86</sup> After a

80 Marilyn Lake and Natasha Campo, 'International Activism and Organisations—Theme', *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, accessed 21 November, 2015, [www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0200b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0200b.htm).

81 Patrick Kilby, *NGOs and Political Change: A History of the Australian Council for International Development* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 80, doi.org/10.22459/NPC.08.2015.

82 Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 7.

83 Ballantyne to Phyllis Wild, 14 October 1980, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

84 Ballantyne to Phyllis Wild, 14 October 1980, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

85 WILPF conference report, 1983, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 52.

86 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 73.

public meeting associated with the NGO gathering at Copenhagen, which focused solely on women and national liberation, some European members of WILPF tried to organise a protest against what they thought was too great an emphasis on supporting violence and not enough on WILPF's pacifist objectives. Ballantyne recognised that the radicalism of the US participants and the 'presence of women who had themselves been involved in liberation struggle' had a 'traumatizing effect on many of our European members'.<sup>87</sup>

This ongoing tension within WILPF and the wider women's anti-war movement over violence and oppression once again highlighted WILPF's difficulty in engaging with violent insurgencies. Ballantyne felt the failure of some WILPF members to sympathise with national liberation struggles showed

that we have failed in self-education, in developing toward the 21st century as a coherent international organisation. We must change that if we are to survive or be an effective women's peace organisation.<sup>88</sup>

Here the 'eurocentrism' of WILPF became an issue as the wider international women's movement broadened.

## 1985 Nairobi, and the Pacific regional conference

Concerned that WILPF and the wider international NGO community were too focused on the northern hemisphere, especially as decolonisation was rapidly transforming the Pacific region, WILPF Australia organised the Australian Pacific Women's Peace Conference in Sydney in 1985.<sup>89</sup> More than 300 women participated from over twenty Pacific nations, all providing personal insight into their struggles against imperialism and oppressive regimes. The gathering made clear that 'there can be no peace without justice' and pointed to specific forms of injustice relating to the region. They identified transnational corporations working alongside states as being primary oppressors which acted 'intentionally or otherwise in

87 Ballantyne to Phyllis Wild, 14 October 1980, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

88 Ballantyne to Phyllis Wild, 14 October 1980, Box 53/4, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

89 Kath Gibson, 'Pacific Women Speak Out', *Pax et Libertas* 50, no. 3 (September 1985). Statements from the Australian Pacific Women's Peace Conference, Sydney 28–30 June 1985, Box 54/1, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

denying the fruits of development from many of the people of the region.<sup>90</sup> Capitalism and imperialism were identified as major forces of oppression as foreign powers continued to build military bases and test nuclear weapons. The conference called out 'continuing suffering, violence and abuse of Human Rights in East Timor, West Papua, Australia, Aotearoa [New Zealand], Belau, Kanaky, Polynesia, Philippines and Easter Island.'<sup>91</sup> WILPF recognised the rights of Indigenous people and supported calls for land rights in Australia and self-determination in the rest of the Pacific. They never advocated violence in resisting oppression but engaged in letter writing campaigns expressing criticism of oppressor powers.<sup>92</sup> Kath Gibson, who reported on the conference to *Pax et Libertas*, felt that it 'succeeded in creating and strengthening a Pacific consciousness'. As we have seen, it might also be seen a returning to the regional preoccupations of the organisation during the interwar years. WILPF Australia hoped to continue meeting with their Pacific colleagues into the future.<sup>93</sup>

WILPF NSW branch president Elizabeth Mattick subsequently led a group that travelled to Nairobi, Kenya, for the third UN women's conference after the Sydney Pacific conference in July 1985. She took with her a document drafted for circulation to the wider international community which outlined the statements Pacific women had made. As at the 1980 Copenhagen conference, Ballantyne chaired the UN NGO conference planning committee as secretary general of WILPF.<sup>94</sup> At WILPF's insistence, a 'Peace Tent' was established where issues thought to be 'too political' could be openly discussed. The 'Peace Tent' was declared a great success as it became a 'focal point for intense discussion of the reasons of conflict'. It was an important and necessary initiative, not least because at the official UN conference many issues were not discussed due to US officials threatening to boycott if apartheid, militarism, imperialism or the Palestinian question were debated.<sup>95</sup>

90 Statements from the Australian Pacific Women's Peace Conference, Sydney 28–30 June, 1985, Box 54/1, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

91 Statements from the Australian Pacific Women's Peace Conference, Sydney 28–30 June, 1985, Box 54/1, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

92 For example in 1983 WILPF wrote to the UN expressing concern about the plebiscite in the Republic of Palau (Belau), which would give 'free association' with the US. In 1981 Palau adopted a nuclear-free constitution, but the US wanted to use the territory to store nuclear weapons. WILPF believed that the US had not ensured 'adequate time for political education with Palau' and asked for the plebiscite to be postponed. The vote was very contentious and was not accepted until 1994. Elizabeth Mattick to Girma Abebe, UN Trusteeship Council NY, 10 January 1983, Box 54/1, WILPF, SCPC, CU Archives.

93 Gibson, 'Pacific Women Speak Out'.

94 Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, 95.

95 Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 8. See also Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, 95. Janet Bruin and Ballantyne, 'What Happened in Nairobi?', *Pax et Libertas* 50, no. 3 (September 1985).



**Outside the Peace Tent at the Nairobi UN NGO conference July 1985, artwork reads a quote from Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938).**

Source: Photo courtesy of Margaret Bearlin, photographer.

The NGO conference at Nairobi became the largest of all three women's conferences. It had almost 15,000 participants and journalists, overshadowing the UN event which had only 1,500 attendees. Observing the official conference, Mattick found that 'compared with the forum, the conference could only be described as dull. Indeed many official delegates found it much more interesting to attend forum workshops.'<sup>96</sup> The issue of Zionism was still hotly debated at the 1985 conference but a compromise was negotiated where the phrase 'all forms of racial discrimination' replaced the contentious word Zionism. This allowed the conference document to be adopted by consensus and the conference ended the decade on a more positive and inclusive note than it had begun.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Mattick, 'Nairobi, Report to the Australian Section', 1985, quoted in Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, 96.

<sup>97</sup> Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women', 9.

The issue of Zionism at the various UN women's conferences was an important one for the US, as well as for the US section in WILPF. Gil Troy noted how 'mostly Democratic Jewish feminists' from the US delegation allied with their 'ideological enemies, the Reagan Republicans' to 'liberate the international women's movement from its Zionist obsession'.<sup>98</sup> US President Ronald Reagan's daughter Maureen was appointed head of the US delegation and was instructed to walk out if the conference demonised Zionism. However, the preparation done by activists within the conference meant that most national delegations now saw the issue as a distraction from the real feminist agenda.<sup>99</sup> Friedan reported that 'every reference to Zionism [was] gone', a significant step for the anti-Zionist movement as the first resolution that began to roll back the 'Zionism as racism' campaign.<sup>100</sup>

## 1989 triennial conference in Sydney

The 1980s came to a close with WILPF Australia hosting the triennial conference in 1989 in Sydney, the first time it was held in the southern hemisphere. Themed 'women building a common and secure future', over 300 women from around the world travelled to Australia to be a part of the proceedings held at Sancta Sophia College at the University of Sydney.<sup>101</sup> In setting the direction for the conference, the Australian section used the opportunity to focus WILPF's attention on the Pacific and issues specific to the Asia-Pacific region. With visiting members from countries such as Fiji, Guam, Rarotonga and Belau, the keynote speaker, Senator Margaret Reynolds, told the conference:

It is important that women from the rest of the world, attending this Congress, hear women from the Pacific speak about issues of importance to them, including the indigenous Pacific people's movement to be nuclear free and independent. This Congress helps give the Pacific people's struggle international publicity and support.<sup>102</sup>

98 Troy, *Moynihan's Moment*, 243.

99 Troy, *Moynihan's Moment*, 243.

100 Troy, *Moynihan's Moment*, 243.

101 'Report of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sydney, Australia 14–25 July 1989, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*.

102 'Report of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sydney, Australia 14–25 July 1989, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*.





**Bettina Glass, *Feminine strength*. Portrait of Margaret Reynolds, 1990. Painting, acrylic on canvas, 118.9 x 119 cm.**

Source: National Library of Australia, viewed 11 April 2022, [nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136227576](http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136227576).

Bundjalung woman Kaye Mundine, a member of WILPF and long-time campaigner for peace and social justice, officially opened the conference with a welcome to country.<sup>103</sup> WILPF Australia had supported Mundine to attend the World Congress for Women in Moscow in 1987 to discuss issues relating to Indigenous Australia, reconfirming their commitment to helping amplify the voices of active Indigenous women.<sup>104</sup> In her welcome

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103 Gai Smith, 'Remembering a Fearless Champion—Kaye Mundine (1947–2016)', *South Sydney Herald*, 9 August 2016, accessed 3 November 2022, [www.southsydneyherald.com.au/remembering-a-fearless-champion-kaye-mundine-1947-2016/](http://www.southsydneyherald.com.au/remembering-a-fearless-champion-kaye-mundine-1947-2016/).

104 'Report of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sydney, Australia 14–25 July 1989, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 57.

address, Mundine gave a short history of Indigenous issues and the violence of colonisation as well as the continuing disadvantage experienced by Indigenous peoples. She also called the conference to action:

You cannot walk away from here, thinking this is an Australian problem. You have a responsibility to know and understand the issues. For what I am saying today, may also be happening in your country in relation to Indigenous peoples.<sup>105</sup>

Continuing the conversation was a keynote from Barbara Shaw, an Indigenous activist from Alice Springs, who discussed specific issues relating to 'the plight of Aboriginal women'.<sup>106</sup> The conference ended with a seminar 'for Indigenous Women and Women from Developing Countries' which again demonstrated WILPF's commitment to combatting racism and dealing with issues of decolonisation and economic development. However, following traditions of the Black Power movement that had influenced many anti-racism movements since the 1960s, the organising committee, consisting of representatives of Aboriginal women's organisations and 'representatives of third world communities', were polarised on the question of whether European women should be present at the seminar. It was decided that while they were not to be entirely excluded, European women were only allowed limited participation. Many criticised the decision which they felt 'stifled the all-important educational opportunity for WILPF members all over the world to gain an intimate understanding of the problems faced by indigenous women from the Pacific area'.<sup>107</sup>

## 1995 Beijing Peace Train

In the 1990s WILPF's activity maintained a regional focus. They campaigned on a range of issues, from traditional owners' land rights and environmental issues to the mining and export of uranium and regional conflicts, with specific focus on East Timor, Bougainville and Cambodia.<sup>108</sup> WILPF also opposed Australia's role in the Gulf War, joining with other peace groups to

105 Kaye Mundine, 'Report of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sydney, Australia 14–25 July 1989, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 2.

106 Judith Smart and Shurlee Swain, eds, 'Shaw, Barbara Catherine (1952–)', *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, 2 May 2014, accessed 19 July 2019, [www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0712b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0712b.htm).

107 'Report of the Twenty-Fourth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sydney, Australia 14–25 July 1989, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 178.

108 'Report of the Twenty-Fifth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', St Cruz Bolivia 1–6 July 1992, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 59.

stage demonstrations and hold public meetings. The ACT branch was active in opposing the government's decision to host an Australian International Defence Exhibition (AIDEX) in Canberra in 1991. The event was the largest exhibition of military hardware held in Australia and drew large protests from the combined anti-war movement.<sup>109</sup> WILPF women held placards around intersections in Canberra away from other protesters with slogans such as 'THE ARMS TRADE MAKES US POORER NOT SAFER' and tried to talk directly with the community. As they had at the height of the feminist and women's liberation movement, they sought to 'negotiate our own expression of protest' rather than participating in the 'violence is entertainment' media.<sup>110</sup> Many protesters complained of misrepresentation through the media's sensationalised reporting, and the protests were marked by allegations of extensive police violence, with over 200 arrests.<sup>111</sup> The ACT branch sent out a media release on Mother's Day, May 8, urging the cancellation of AIDEX '91, to cease participation in the arms trade, and to reclaim 'the original idea' of the day which was conceived as a time 'when everyone should dedicate themselves anew to the task of bringing about world peace', as 'mothers do not raise their sons to kill other women's sons'.<sup>112</sup>

National financial membership of WILPF Australia remained steady at around 300 members. In the lead up to WILPF's participation in the 1995 Fourth UN Conference on Women, however, the branch was able to apply for government funding which expanded the reach of WILPF's activities and encouraged more young women to join. WILPF, with its older membership profile, was always keen to recruit younger peace activists. Australian feminism during this time followed a state-sponsored approach with senior women taking on roles in the public service to extend the reach and resources of their activism. These women, labelled 'femocrats', had a significant impact on government policy which was 'noted with interest by the rest of the world'.<sup>113</sup> Positions were created within government to keep gender issues on the national agenda, with one of the first appointees to the role of Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women being a WILPF member, Senator

109 For more on these protests see: Iain McIntyre, 'The AIDEX '91 Protest: A Case Study of Obstructive Direct Action' (Masters thesis, University of Melbourne, 2011).

110 'Piecing it Together: Hearing the Stories of AIDEX '91', prepared by the Friends of the Hearings, 1991–1995 (Curtin ACT: Penniless Publications, 1995), 195.

111 McIntyre, 'The AIDEX '91 Protest: A Case Study of Obstructive Direct Action'.

112 ACT Branch of WILPF, 'Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—General Representations', media release, 8 May 1991 (item, Canberra, 4 December 1986), A463, 1989/2011 PART 4, National Archives of Australia (NAA).

113 Verity Burgmann, *Power, Profit and Protest. Australian Social Movements and Globalisation* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 151.



Margaret Reynolds. An Office for the Status of Women (OSW) was created by the Hawke Labor Government, replacing the advisory council established by Fraser. The new office monitored issues relating to violence against women internationally and nationally, ran public awareness campaigns, and even released a women's budget statement that outlined the budget's repercussions for women's lives.<sup>114</sup> In 1993–1994 the Labor Government also allocated funding to national women's organisations through a National Agenda for Women Grants Program, and WILPF received a grant that allowed the opening of a national office.<sup>115</sup> WILPF, encouraged by the changing cultural and political landscape, began implementing more modern feminist organising techniques by auditing documents and advocating use of 'non-sexist language in all WILPF publications'.<sup>116</sup>



**'ACT Arms Trade makes us poorer not safer' posters created for the AIDEX protests in 1991. Used again here in the mid-2000s by Margaret Bearlin and Annie Didcott at GDAMS (Global Day of Action on Military Spending) demonstration in Canberra.**

Source: Photo courtesy of Margaret Bearlin.

<sup>114</sup> Burgmann, *Power, Profit and Protest*, 151.

<sup>115</sup> 'Report of the Twenty-Sixth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Helsinki Finland, 1–6 August 1995, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 55.

<sup>116</sup> 'Report of the Twenty-Fifth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', St Cruz Bolivia 1–6 July 1992, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 60.

The mid-1990s saw attention again focus on the UN women's conferences with the fourth conference, held in Beijing in 1995, designed to function as a review and update to the previous conferences. As on previous occasions, WILPF in Australia spent significant time and energy preparing for the program, especially their contribution to the parallel NGO forum and lobbying the government's delegation to the conference to ensure adequate attention was paid to peace issues.<sup>117</sup> Internationally, WILPF organised their triennial conference, celebrating 80 years of organising, in Helsinki, Finland, in 1995 to leave enough time for a Peace Train of women travelling overland through St Petersburg, Kiev, Bucharest, Sofia, Istanbul, Almaty and into China for the UN women's conference.<sup>118</sup> There were 230 women who undertook the journey, including a significant cohort of Australians. The women involved spoke of the trip as a transformative experience. The train compartments 'hummed with activity' as women spent days walking through the cities where they stopped, talking to local groups and learning about local conditions for women. Young participants also learnt from discussions with older members: 'we would stumble and sway as we crossed between the coaches to the meeting cars to attend workshops ranging from alternative economics to sewing circles'.<sup>119</sup> Travelling through the former Soviet countries and into China during this time with an expressly political agenda of peace and internationalism was cause for concern in some countries they passed through. It seemed, wrote Heather Cummings, that 'a simple act of women meeting women provoked our hosts ... [who] feared the impact of "radical" women mostly from Western Europe, the United States and Australia upon local women'.<sup>120</sup> Women noticed they were followed on public buses while in Turkey, and the Chinese Government refused to allow the train to stop in Urumchi, sending a 'train with 70 security and government representatives to escort us through the country'.<sup>121</sup>

117 'Report of the Twenty-Sixth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Helsinki Finland, 1–6 August 1995, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 53.

118 Heather Cummings, 'The WILPF Peace Train: Training for Peace from Helsinki to Beijing', *International Peace Update* 60, no. 5–6 (November 1995): 22.

119 Cummings, 'The WILPF Peace Train', 23.

120 Cummings, 'The WILPF Peace Train', 22.

121 Cummings, 'The WILPF Peace Train', 22.



**The Australian delegation to the 1995 WILPF conference in Helsinki.**

Left to right: Jenni Dall, Yumi Lee, Felicity Hill, Hellen Cooke and Leonie Ebert pictured.

Source: Photo courtesy of Margaret Bearlin, photographer.

While in Beijing, NGO groups found that access to the UN conference was much more limited than it had been at previous conferences.<sup>122</sup> WILPF therefore spent its time organising a peace caucus through the NGO parallel conference that monitored the UN Platform for Action and released an alternative declaration when it felt the positions taken by governments were too weak. They challenged governments to ‘radically transform the social, economic and political structures that oppress women worldwide’.<sup>123</sup> The NGO conference opened with more than 30,000 participants in the Beijing Olympic Stadium and followed on with plenaries and forums in nearby Huairou. Once again, by organising a Peace Tent at the conference, WILPF created a meeting space for people to ‘network, listen and learn, to build friendships and solidarity, and to give shelter.’<sup>124</sup> Much more than just participating in the bureaucratic processes of conferencing, women recounted feeling ‘empowered by being with so many women from different parts of the world working for peace and justice and the rights of women’.<sup>125</sup>

122 ‘World Women’s Conference’, *International Peace Update* 60, no. 5–6 (November 1995), 10.

123 ‘Beijing NGO Declaration’, *International Peace Update* 60, no. 5–6 (November 1995), 24.

124 ‘Ten Busy Days at the NGO Forum’, *International Peace Update* 60, no. 5–6 (November 1995), 9.

125 ‘Ten Busy Days at the NGO Forum’, *International Peace Update* 60, no. 5–6 (November 1995), 9.

## Security Council Resolution 1325

After the election of the Liberal–National Coalition Government led by John Howard in 1996, WILPF’s federal funding dried up. By 1998 they were considered ‘too international’ even to qualify for funding through the OSW, and the decline in funds began to reduce the scope of their activity.<sup>126</sup> The new conservative agenda of the government had a narrow view of the national interest. Nonetheless WILPF, familiar with surviving on limited funds and volunteer commitment, continued their work despite the difficulties with member Yumi Lee representing the organisation on the Department of Foreign Affairs’ National Consultative Committee for Peace and Disarmament.<sup>127</sup> They did not hesitate to publish a newspaper advertisement calling the government to withdraw from military involvement in the Persian Gulf.<sup>128</sup> WILPF did not need to fear criticising a government that was no longer providing funding.

Internationally, the WILPF office was focused on the platform of action that resulted from the Beijing conference and interested in finding a way for the ‘critical area of concern—Women and Armed Conflict’ to be advanced in a meaningful way by the UN.<sup>129</sup> Australian WILPF member Felicity Hill had been an active participant who travelled on the Peace Train to the 1995 conference. The following year she was the disarmament intern for WILPF International before becoming the director of the New York office of WILPF which was primarily responsible for lobbying the UN.<sup>130</sup> In 1998 the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) reviewed the Beijing platform of action in a two-week long session. WILPF coordinated a group of international NGOs known as the ‘Women and Armed Conflict Caucus’ who drafted an outcome document. As the feminist and scholar Cynthia Cockburn noted in her account of the efforts of women’s organisations lobbying the UN in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was here that there was a subtle shift away from getting conflict on the UN’s ‘women

126 ‘Report of the Twenty-Seventh International Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’, Baltimore USA, 24–31 July 1998, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 70.

127 ‘Report of the Twenty-Seventh International Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’, Baltimore USA, 24–31 July 1998.

128 ‘Report of the Twenty-Seventh International Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’, Baltimore USA, 24–31 July 1998.

129 Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women’s Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 139, doi.org/10.5040/9781350220287.

130 Felicity Hill, ‘Reaching Critical Will’, in *Listen to Women for a Change*, ed. Irmgard Heilberger and Barbara Lochbihler (WILPF German Section, October 2010), 27.

agenda' to getting 'women and armed conflict' on the main agenda.<sup>131</sup> 'They set their sights on the Security Council', wrote Cockburn, turning their attention to 'the power centre of the UN, responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security'.<sup>132</sup>

This lobbying culminated in the historic passing of the SCR 1325 in 2000. Participants in the NGO working groups included Amnesty International, International Alert, the Hague Appeal for Peace, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, the International Peace Research Association and WILPF, with former secretary General Edith Ballantyne, Barbara Lochbihler and Felicity Hill convening and coordinating the efforts of the NGOs. These women led the lobbying movement with determination and skill but, as Cockburn noted, they would not have been effective without organisational backing and:

A full list would run into hundreds, perhaps thousands, and would include a web of women spreading from the United Nations Plaza in New York to the killing fields of many war-afflicted countries.<sup>133</sup>

Painstaking effort by the NGOs of the working group was put into the promotion of the women, peace and security agenda in the lead-up to the passing of UNSCR 1325. It was a resolution for which 'the groundwork, the diplomacy, and lobbying, the drafting and redrafting, was almost entirely the work of civil society, and certainly the first in which the actors were almost all women'.<sup>134</sup> Cultivating allies within the UN system, the NGO group approached the Namibian Ambassador, Martin Andjaba, who was due to take up the presidency of the Security Council in October 2000. The presidency rotated between member states monthly, and each president was allowed to initiate a theme. Andjaba agreed to sponsor a session on 'Women, Peace and Security'. 'Wilpfers were jubilant', noted Felicity Hill in response to its announcement.<sup>135</sup> From then on the NGOs compiled documents and reading lists for members of the Security Council, lobbied them relentlessly, and drafted the resolution that was eventually adopted by the council on 31 October 2000.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 140.

<sup>132</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 140.

<sup>133</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 139–40.

<sup>134</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 141.

<sup>135</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 141.

<sup>136</sup> Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 141.



UNSCR 1325 consisted of 18 points, grouped in three themes.<sup>137</sup> First, there was protection, which called for a recognition of gender-specific needs in time of war and the 'protection of women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and an end to impunity for these crimes.'<sup>138</sup> Participation was the second theme and called for the inclusion of women in all levels of peace negotiations, from the local and national to the international. The last theme called for the inclusion of a gendered perspective in UN peacekeeping, especially gender sensitive training in measures of demobilisation, reintegration and reconstruction after war. After its passing by the council, the NGO group continued its activity to ensure that the issue remained a priority and was implemented by member states and the UN. The Ford Foundation also now provided funding to the NGO group to employ a coordinator so Felicity Hill was able to return to her WILPF work, while WILPF received an additional grant to fund the creation of the PeaceWomen website. That provided information to the wider activist community on UNSCR 1325 and monitored the UN systems to ensure the organisation included gender awareness in all its work.<sup>139</sup> While WILPF undoubtedly played a significant role in the NGO activity around UNSCR 1325, they did not necessarily see themselves as the driver of the overall campaign that had 'so many involved'.<sup>140</sup> It is also not the case that all WILPF members were comfortable with the pathway the organisation was taking. While many celebrated the passing of the resolution, others criticised the new direction of WILPF lobbying.

WILPF was more explicitly feminist than the other NGOs that were active in the working group, and was the only one to be unequivocally anti-militarist. Therefore, many members felt disappointed that the resolution made no mention of ending war itself, and only talked briefly about women's role in preventing war.<sup>141</sup> Some saw it as cooperative, with the emphasis on 'protection' focusing only on women as victims and the absence of a strong anti-war theme simply 'trying to make war safer for women'. Hill, as a key player in the adoption of the resolution, recognised how the radical elements of WILPF's ideology became muted in a need to adapt to the reality of the UN bureaucracy. Writing on the significance and impact of UNSCR 1325,

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137 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting, on 31 October 2000, accessed 3 February 2022, [www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/#resolution](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/#resolution).

138 Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 141.

139 See: [www.peacewomen.org/](http://www.peacewomen.org/) (accessed 23 July 2019).

140 Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 146.

141 Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 147.

she explained how the NGOs succeeded only 'by being self-effacing and self-censoring, using information, persuasion, and rhetorical entrapment to bring along the UN personnel, civil servants and diplomats concerned'.<sup>142</sup> Many academics have also criticised how the resolution 'left the war system essentially undisturbed'.<sup>143</sup> Hill recognised the limitations of the resolution in its failure to theorise gender in a complex way. Discussing the revolutionary power of the resolution at a roundtable, she noted that the resolution could:

transform ways of understanding how security is conceived, protected and enforced. It could make photos of only male leaders at peace negotiating tables starkly outdated. But for this to happen, the focus has to move from women to men, and this still hasn't happened.<sup>144</sup>

The UN failed to interrogate militarised masculinities, or masculinity more generally, in grappling with the over-representation of men in the war system.

After the passing of UNSCR 1325 Australian WILPF focused on encouraging the federal government to develop a National Action Plan. As the responsibility for implementation of UNSCR 1325 lay with member states of the UN, realisation of the action plan became a national issue, allowing WILPF once again to apply for grants from the OSW. In 2003 they received \$10,000 to assist in creating educational packages about the resolution to be distributed to secondary schools, community groups and parliamentarians.<sup>145</sup> The funds also helped WILPF Australia improve their online presence and make information about UNSCR 1325 more widely available. In 2009 WILPF received another large government grant to 'undertake community consultations and prepare a draft report on the content of a National Action Plan'.<sup>146</sup> The resulting discussion paper was submitted to the government, which responded by creating an inter-departmental working group to develop a plan 'informed by key suggestions from WILPF Australia's network'. The 'Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace

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142 Felicity Hill, 'How and When Has Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security Impacted Negotiations Outside the Security Council?' (Masters thesis, Uppsala University Programme of International Studies, 2004); Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 148.

143 Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 148.

144 Felicity Hill, quoted in Carol Cohn, Helen Kinsella and Sheri Gibbings, 'Women, Peace and Security Resolution 1325', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 1 (1 January 2004): 137, doi.org/10.1080/1461674032000165969.

145 'Report of the Twenty-Eighth International Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', Sweden, August 2004, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 95.

146 'WILPF International Congress Report', Costa Rica, 2011, Sklar and Dublin, *Women and Social Movements*, 103; WILPF Australian section, *Developing a National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, report compiled by Di Zetlin (School of Political Science and International Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies and Gender Studies, University of Queensland, 2009).

and Security 2012–2018’ was launched on International Women’s Day on 8 March 2012.<sup>147</sup> The Australian Government subsequently claimed its international reputation as a leader in implementing UNSCR 1325 and became the largest contributor to the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund.<sup>148</sup> The implementation of the National Action Plan ‘played a pivotal role in a successful campaign for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council (2013–2014).’<sup>149</sup>



**Chris Henderson and Melody Kemp, national launch of the Children of the Gulf War photo exhibition, March 2003, Brisbane City Hall.**

The event was the Brisbane City Hall opening of the Children of the Gulf War exhibition, March 2003, on the eve of the global rally to stop the planned war on Iraq. Fifty-eight photographs depicted the impact of war and depleted uranium on Iraqi women, children and the environment, taken by Japanese photojournalist Takashi Morizumi. Melody and I were co-organisers of the project. This subsequently became the launch of an extended national tour of the exhibition to cities and towns around the country.

Source: Photographer Sean Kemp.

147 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, ‘Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2012–2018’, accessed 12 December 2022, [www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/publications-articles/government-international/australian-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2012-2018?HTML](http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/publications-articles/government-international/australian-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2012-2018?HTML).

148 Barbara K Trojanowska, ‘Norm Negotiation in the Australian Government’s Implementation of UNSCR 1325’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (2019): 30, doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2018.1548560.

149 Trojanowska, ‘Norm Negotiation in the Australian Government’s Implementation of UNSCR 1325’, 29.



Other activities pursued alongside the focus on UNSCR 1325 were often driven by individual members who wanted to be more radical in opposing war rather than exclusively engaging with the flawed UN system. The Iraq War created another crisis that spurred WILPF to public protest. Members again joined with other anti-war activities around the country in 2003 to encourage the Australian Government to avoid going to war. War, ironically, helped with recruitment and Mary Ziesak lamented the core paradox of WILPF's organising; 'a bitter sweet gain that we have to have the imminent threat of war to recruit new members.'<sup>150</sup> When Australia did enter the Iraq War, WILPF member Ruth Russell made the personal decision to travel to Iraq in 2003 with an organised group of protesters to become 'human shields'. One of the great motivators for her dramatic and dangerous action was to circumvent the national media in gathering information. Russell, like many women before her, wanted to 'report back independent of any censoring'.<sup>151</sup> WILPF Australia also purchased a photographic exhibition called 'Children of the Gulf War' by Japanese photographer Takashi Morizumi and organised exhibitions, led by members Melody Kemp and Christine Henderson, all over the country during 2004.<sup>152</sup> Noting the 'profound impact' the images had on viewers, WILPF felt they were an 'effective method of lobbying' in that they reminded people of the emotional reality of war: 'everyone who views this exhibition is moved, some to tears'.<sup>153</sup>

The emphasis on mainstreaming the women, peace and security agenda reminded many in the organisation of WILPF's own unconventional history and traditions. While it was important to have a gender perspective included in the workings and policy decisions of government, WILPF was an organisation that had long refused to be mainstreamed itself. In the historian and feminist Marilyn Lake's words:

It remains a woman-based and woman-focused organization able to invoke the common interests and solidarity of women across the world—able to make a persuasive international case in support of the interests of women and children.<sup>154</sup>

150 'Report of the Twenty-Eighth International Congress of the WILPF', (2004), 95.

151 Ruth Russell, *Human Shield in Iraq: Finding a Way Forward for Peace* (Adelaide: Seaview Press, 2005), 5.

152 'Report of the Twenty-Eighth International Congress of the WILPF', (2004), 95.

153 'Report of the Twenty-Eighth International Congress of the WILPF', (2004), 95.

154 Marilyn Lake, WILPF Centenary Exhibition Launch Speech, Canberra Museum and Art Gallery, 27 February 2015.

Nonetheless, WILPF's focus on engaging the UN and its various forums, like the CSW, made it an attractive organisation for young women interested in the workings of international diplomacy and the increasingly professionalised international sphere. The Young WILPF (YWILPF) network was developed in 2011, and younger feminists encouraged a reinvigoration of the program in Australia.<sup>155</sup> WILPF's membership in Australia remained relatively stable, as it was always a small and committed membership that drove its activity; they were able to sustain activity despite contending with the associational decline that had affected many community groups and trade unions from the 1970s onwards.<sup>156</sup>

In 2010 WILPF invited Professor Marilyn Lake to speak to the ACT branch where she gave a talk on the topic of 'Rediscovering Australia's Peace History'.<sup>157</sup> The talk moved many in the organisation to think seriously about understanding the history of WILPF women in Australia. In the lead-up to the 2015 centenary of WILPF's organising in Australia, the section became focused on publicising their history. From 2011 onwards the gathering of stories for the anniversary was a high priority in all their reports. Branch coordinators Ruth Russell and Barbara O'Dwyer began calling on members to collect and sort through personal archives to submit resources to the National Library of Australia for use in exhibitions.

In researching this history, I was able to network with leading members Margaret Bearlin and Hellen Cooke who had become very active in trying to promote WILPF's history. They were generous in opening their archives to my research efforts in the interests of a rigorous and critical appraisal of WILPF's efforts over the course of a century. Russell and O'Dwyer asked members to think critically about war remembrance in Australia:

We need to ask ourselves, friends and others—does this Anzac myth really define you as an Australian? Is mateship and support for others in times of distress, not really a universal characteristic? Are there not other better more defining characteristics that we would want to highlight to show Australians in a more progressive light?<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> *Peace and Freedom* 48, Issue 3 (December 2011): 11.

<sup>156</sup> Judith Smart and Marian Quartly, *Respectable Radicals: A History of the National Council of Women of Australia 1896–2006* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 419.

<sup>157</sup> WILPF posters, accessed 3 November 2022, [www.wilpf.org.au/wilpf-history/](http://www.wilpf.org.au/wilpf-history/).

<sup>158</sup> Ruth Russell and Barbara O'Dwyer, 'National Coordinators Report', *Peace and Freedom* 52, Issues 1 and 2 (April 2013): 2.

‘We join with historian Marilyn Lake’, Hellen Cooke wrote, ‘in reclaiming Australia’s true history’.<sup>159</sup> Efforts to recover their history were inherently political to the women of WILPF. A centenary exhibition was held at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, showcasing the ephemera and documents from WILPF’s extensive archives.

By the 2015 centenary conference of WILPF, held at The Hague in the Peace Palace—the same venue as the conference in 1915—WILPF women were finding inspiration in reflecting on their history as an organisation and reconsidering its future direction. President Kozue Akibayashi wrote in the conference report of how relevant the ideas of the founding women in 1915 were to the work of WILPF women today:

Our founders’ analysis—that wars start in the violence of our daily lives, and that they are perpetuated and made to seem natural and inevitable by the intertwined systems of patriarchy, militarism, and an economy based on profits rather than needs—remains relevant to us today.<sup>160</sup>



**WILPF conference attendees outside the Peace Palace, The Hague, 2015.**

Source: Photo by the author.

<sup>159</sup> Hellen Cooke, *Peace and Freedom* 49, Issues 2 and 3 (September 2012), 9.

<sup>160</sup> Kozue Akibayashi, ‘Congress Report 2015’, 1. Digitised report available online (accessed 15 December 2022): [issuu.com/wilpf/docs/congress\\_report\\_spreads\\_final](https://issuu.com/wilpf/docs/congress_report_spreads_final).



**Delegates to the WILPF conference at The Hague holding a handmade quilt depicting historical women from the Australian branch, 2015.**

Source: Photo by the author. Quilt made by Peaceknits project in Queanbeyan.



Building on the new momentum inspired by their own history, WILPF produced a new manifesto which was adopted by the conference. Written by Cockburn, it focused on the need for WILPF to return to discussions of root causes of war. The organisation committed to agitating for reform of the flawed structures of the UN rather than accepting and working within them.<sup>161</sup>

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the Cold War dichotomies dissolved and the world entered a new economic and diplomatic order, WILPF was forced to adapt their campaign focus in a changing globalised system that brought new challenges to equality and individual freedoms. Internationally, this saw WILPF focus on an institutional route that involved directing their energies into the systems and forums of the UN and associated bodies. Many activists felt that the compromises necessary to work within these bureaucratic structures were important, and that women had to 'risk getting our hands dirty if we are to make a contribution to resolving armed conflict and ending war itself.'<sup>162</sup> Despite its weaknesses and shortcomings, there was a sense that UNSCR 1325 had provided more leverage and tools for activists working in conflict zones to promote issues of gender and conflict, especially as its passing by the Security Council meant the UN publicly acknowledged gender-specific issues of women in war.

The explosion in other women's NGOs meant WILPF was part of a larger international arena and had to find ways to stand out and make strong statements in ways that would be productive and recognised. WILPF embraced the modern, institutionalised NGO identity throughout the UN Decade for Women. Yet its structure and history always made it different from other professional NGOs. While it functioned as a lobbying organisation to the UN, alongside other organisations like Amnesty International and the International Committee of the Red Cross, WILPF always maintained and encouraged recruitment on a local level, relying on participation. It performed the important role of connecting women from all walks of life to the international arena. Focusing on their wider membership similarly gave WILPF stronger lobbying potential, especially as the UN became more directed by national government decisions made outside the UN. WILPF contributed to this political environment that continued a tradition of women's transnationalism that had 'a dynamic of its own which is not subordinate to or simply a proxy for the political battles fought by men.'

161 'WILPF Manifesto 2015', accessed 15 December 2022, [www.wilpf.org/publications/wilpf-manifesto-2015/](http://www.wilpf.org/publications/wilpf-manifesto-2015/).

162 Cockburn, *From Where We Stand*, 155.

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