

Conclusion

‘The only way you can preserve peace is to prepare for war.’¹ In 2022, during an election campaign on Anzac Day, the defence minister in a Liberal–National Coalition Government, Peter Dutton, had unknowingly answered Doris Blackburn’s question of 1947: ‘Is preparation for war the best means of preserving peace?’ The minister was responding to rising conflict between China and the West, which raised the spectre of war over the future of Taiwan, and the outbreak of an actual European war in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine in an act of aggression that shocked the world.

The largest land incursion in Europe since World War II has shattered two complacent assumptions that had become widespread about modern warfare: that nuclear weapons were no longer a threat, and that technology and the globalised financial system meant conventional wars between dominant powers were a thing of the past. Horrifying images have spread around the world, rapidly assisted by social media showing civilian casualties and a refugee crisis. Those images clearly demonstrate the gendered impact of the modern war and the all-too-familiar use of rape as an instrument of warfare. Ukrainian woman Antonina Medvedchuk spoke with journalists about her fear of sexual violence: ‘Every break between curfew and bombing I was looking for emergency contraception instead of a basic first aid kit,’ she said.

1 Peter Dutton comments on Nine’s *Today* show, quoted in Angus Thompson, “Reality of our Time”: Dutton Warns Australians to Prepare for War’, *The Age*, 25 April 2022, accessed 25 April 2022, www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/reality-of-our-time-dutton-warns-australians-to-prepare-for-war-20220425-p5afuy.html.

My mother tried to reassure me: ‘This is not a war like that, they don’t exist anymore, they are from old movies.’ I have been a feminist for eight years, and I cried in silence, because all wars are like this.²

The images coming out of Ukraine that reveal the horrors of war and a renewed understanding of the threat of nuclear weapons have cast new relevance on this history of women’s anti-war activism. The urgency of trying to find alternative ways to achieve peace and security without militarising to address a military threat has become paramount. The central purpose of the existence of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) remains painfully necessary. And indeed WILPF have again contributed to the debate by condemning the illegal actions of Russia and its violation of Ukrainian independence while also urging that we continue to look more deeply at the root causes of war. The secretary general of WILPF, Madeleine Rees, in an open letter to the UN Security Council, simply stated: ‘militarism is literally killing everything.’³

WILPF has provided a platform that fostered Australian women’s political activism over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The task was always momentous and formidable: to pursue peace in an imperfect world. The extensive archives of the organisation illuminate the ways Australian women dealt with the distinctive challenges of internationalism as a political project almost invariably without governmental or institutional support, while contributing to an effective international community of advocacy. From WILPF’s origins in World War I peace activism, women who joined the organisation connected with a worldwide network that allowed them to cultivate an international outlook. This perspective, for Australian women, gave new direction and understanding to their campaigns against conscription, imperialism, militarism in school textbooks, and government spending on war. WILPF members did not shy away from discussing contentious and complex issues. Their insistence on interrogating their own perspectives on difficult topics extended from militarism, war and racism to nationalism, self-determination and communism. Their language

2 Bethan McKernan, ‘Rape as a Weapon: Huge Scale of Sexual Violence Endured in Ukraine Emerges’, *The Guardian*, 4 April 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine.

3 Madeleine Rees, “‘War ‘Over’ Ukraine—Militarism Is Killing Us All,” Writes WILPF Secretary General In An Open Letter To The United Nations Security Council”, 28 January 2022, accessed 4 April 2022, www.wilpf.org/war-over-ukraine-militarism-is-killing-us-all/.

and frameworks changed significantly throughout the decades. Yet their willingness to confront their own shortcomings illustrated a commitment to active engagement in a wide range of domains.

The triennial congresses of WILPF held in different cities of the world provided an important space for international women to develop their politics. Meeting with women of other nationalities, even at times from states officially at war with one another, political women were able to form common bonds and empathise in a community beyond the limitations of nationalism, though disagreement arose from differences in national circumstances. The nature of WILPF members' travels was consequently highly political, each interaction being an opportunity to recruit, each conversation being a chance to disseminate their worldview for the sake of progressive change.

Each WILPF congress produced resolutions and changes to the operation of the organisation. These reports and press releases demonstrated how seriously the women took the output of the conferences and the impact they might have on the wider international political arena. However, often personal reports of the gatherings showed levels of frustration at conference procedure and the practical difficulties of bringing together many women with different languages, ideas and experiences in a productive way. For some Australian participants, the ability to be part of the physical space and be connected to the women separated by huge distances was more valuable than the resolutions they debated. Edith Abbott at the conference in 1949 wrote:

To me the lasting value and joy of meeting such women and talking freely with them between sessions and on 'time off' was of more interest than the actual work of the congress.⁴

Having all the sections as 'seemingly disparate cities of the world' connected into a 'common global space' gave a concrete meaning to internationalism that could not always be reflected in formal policy documents.⁵ As this reflection demonstrates, the apparatus of conferencing and the locations of the gatherings reflected as much about their political priorities as the resolutions at the end.

4 Edith Abbott, report to Australian WILPF section on the 1949 conference, 28 March 1950, Box 1728/3 Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, State Library of Victoria (SLV).

5 Jake Hodder, 'Conferencing the International at the World Pacifist Meeting, 1949,' *Political Geography* 49 (November 2015): 9, doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.03.002.

Internationalism was personally transformative for the women involved in WILPF. On return from the conferences, and in the interwar period when a wider appetite for pacifist sentiment was prevalent, WILPF members began to question national policies in light of their new insights. Publicly discussing the White Australia Policy (WAP) and looking to promote regional engagement signalled a significant departure from prevailing modes of thought, which had been cornerstones of the early twentieth-century Australian progressivism from which WILPF had emerged. While they were not able to provide a definitive denunciation of racial exclusion, their deliberations were significant for the time and a clear representation of how internationalist connection and exposure could provoke discussion and lay the foundations for change. Questioning the WAP of itself was, for this milieu, a highly unusual break from consensus. This re-evaluation continued with their engagement with the Pan-Pacific Women's movement between the wars.



Anti-gun campaigner, 88-year-old Eve Masterman of WILPF holds a sign reading 'Destroy guns and let people live' at a rally in the park outside the Tasmanian Parliament House, in the days after the Port Arthur massacre, Hobart, Tasmania, 4 May 1996.

Source: *The Age*, picture by Jason South, Fairfax Media Archives. See Appendix for a short biography of Eve Masterman.

Those involved were not able to dispense entirely with national interests in formulating their contributions to international policy. However, they utilised the international connections whenever possible to promote national issues internationally, as shown in the mobilisation of the international network over issues relating to Aboriginal rights from the 1950s onwards. Utilising new channels after the creation of the UN and new language once the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, WILPF was moved to refashion its existing idealism, tying its anti-war philosophy to wider issues of human rights and social justice. A new interstate network for the national section of WILPF, formed during the 1960s, illustrated how WILPF in Australia brought the section into line with the international structure, enacting its transformation into a modern non-government organisation (NGO).

Over the years, WILPF expressly cultivated a personal form of internationalism among its members. The Maison Internationale in Geneva acted as the 'heart' of the organisation and became a place for women to meet and interact through their travels.⁶ It was a site of pilgrimage for members. For women who could not afford to travel, it held a meaningful place in their mind as a physical representation of the international network through which WILPF's correspondence and publications flowed. Many women became very devoted to the cause. Historian and feminist Leila Rupp has written of women who 'worked hard, sacrificed their health, and overcame obstacles that stood in the way of full-time commitment'.⁷ They did this because they found joy and fulfilment in their work. For many, it was a place to learn new skills, and gain confidence and support, especially for women unused to public roles. They felt satisfaction in giving to something bigger than themselves, something of immense importance. WILPF facilitated international friendships, promoted universality and strengthened international identities alongside national ones.

Small organisations were crucial in the promotion of internationalism in Australia.⁸ WILPF in Australia was never huge, and internationally by 1926 its estimated membership was only 50,000.⁹ Nonetheless they were well

6 Leila J Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 166, doi.org/10.1515/9780691221816.

7 Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 182.

8 Joy Damousi, 'Does Feminist History have a Future?', *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 80 (2014): 199, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.928188.

9 Laura Beers, 'Advocating for a Feminist Internationalism Between the Wars', in *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (New York: Routledge, 2015), 203, doi.org/10.4324/9781315713113-13.

placed to capitalise on the renewed interest in internationalism that surged after 1918, when a war-weary public was receptive to a new ideas in political life and international affairs. The creation of the League of Nations meant that Australia, as a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles, became a voting nation-state, thereby drawing interest from the women's movement in the possibilities of a state-sponsored internationalism.¹⁰

Lobbying the League of Nations became a significant ritual of power in the global imaginary of the women's movement, as the covenant of the league explicitly stated that 'all positions under and in connection with the League ... shall be open to men and women'.¹¹ WILPF joined in with other women's groups which campaigned to have female representation on the Australian delegation to the league, gaining regular alternate delegates (who were non-voting), with Jessie Street being the first actual delegate in 1946 at the new United Nations (UN). But WILPF did not, as other women's organisations did, define their internationalism by the need to have national accreditation. WILPF women continued to travel with accreditation by their voluntary organisation and utilised its specific advantages of 'informal' influence to have an impact in the international sphere. This continued after the League of Nations was replaced by the UN in 1945, and Australian WILPF woman Irene Greenwood gave first-hand experience of this in a reflection in 1975, noting:

when you go to the United Nations you don't just sit in a seat with earphones on as an observer and have the right to speak or make submissions, but also you go into the corridors behind and you meet comparable groups and then you lobby the leaders of the various countries for certain things that are brought forward on the agenda. And so our influence at the United Nations has been rather more than I indicated, but again it was an indirect influence.¹²

Tracing the travel and funding arrangements of the organisation, it is clear that WILPF, like other women's organisations, had to overcome limitations specific to their gender. For women to become involved in political activism throughout the twentieth century, especially internationalist activism, where travelling was time-consuming and costly, there had to be certain conditions

10 Fiona Paisley, 'Being International at Home: Australian Public Opinion in the League Era', *Journal of Australian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2 October 2019): 429–46, doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2019.1672205.

11 Jill Roe, 'What has Nationalism Offered Australian Women?' in *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 36.

12 Irene Greenwood, 'A Lifetime of Political Activity', in *Women and Politics Conference Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1977), 63.

that would enable them to overcome socialised gendered expectations. Eleanor Moore worked independently as a stenographer and could rely on income from a familial rental investment property.¹³ For others like Edith Waterworth and Margaret Holmes, wealthy families and hired domestic help facilitated political involvement. The scarcity of women in public and political roles has been due to the ‘historical connection between women, housework and childcare’.¹⁴ Many WILPF women regularly travelled with their husbands, making time for WILPF work overseas, or they had partners who were fellow activists and encouraged their public activities.

Financial freedom for women throughout the history of WILPF has been a significant factor in shaping the organisation. In the early years of its operation, unpaid domestic work, along with simple social and legislative impediments, often meant women did not have access to funds outside the family. Discrimination against women in employment and financial matters remained pervasive and widespread.¹⁵ Members had to work creatively to find ways to fund and support their campaigns without institutional backing. Meetings were often held in private spaces, in living rooms and backyards instead of boardrooms. Wealthier members subsidised travel opportunities for others, and craft stalls and fetes were held regularly, such as the annual fete at Janie Kerr’s residence in Melbourne during the early years of WILPF, where the proceeds of arts and craft sales went to building up funding reserves. These methods of fundraising maintained a close coupling with the domestic space and domestic economy. Subscriptions were collected for publications such as *Peacewards*, *Woman Voter* and *Peace and Freedom*, and most of the time spent campaigning, collecting signatures, attending meetings and maintaining the organisation was volunteered—another way in which women’s work remained unpaid while men in established political roles were often remunerated. While this made some things difficult, it also gave the organisation a distinctive voice, where the discussion of grand global struggles was conducted in intimate spaces separate from any intermediating bureaucratic systems. The symbolism of

13 Malcolm Saunders, *Quiet Dissenter: The Life and Thought of an Australian Pacifist: Eleanor May Moore 1875–1949* (Canberra: Peace Research Centre, Australian National University, 1993), 52.

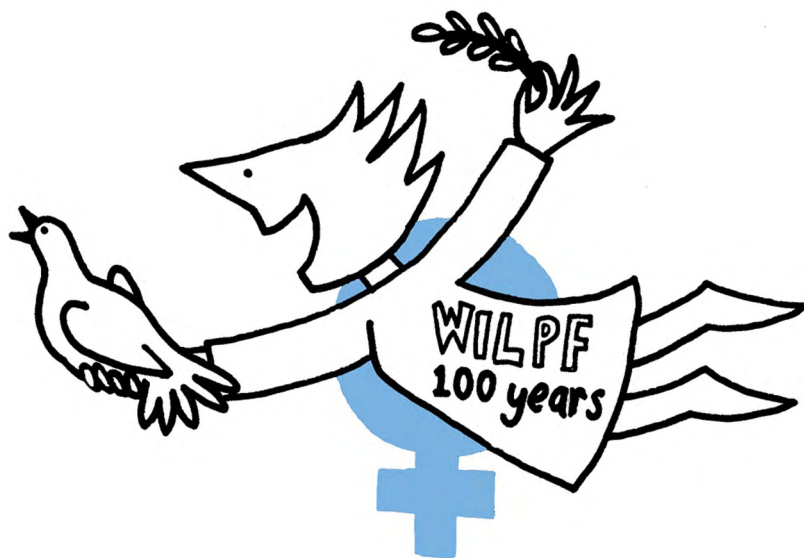
14 Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly, eds, *Doubletime: Women in Victoria, 150 Years* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1985), ix.

15 Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Marian Quartly, and Ann McGrath, *Creating a Nation* (Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1994), 301.

domestic organising reminds us that despite the rhetoric of international affairs, which often talks of nation-states and conflict in the abstract, these serious international questions ultimately reach into these intimate spaces.

WILPF in Australia was especially prone to taking direction from dominant members because the membership over time fluctuated and institutional knowledge became centralised. Disavowal of hierarchical organising structures and the promotion of consensus building, which often characterised women's organising, were not always borne out in operations. By the 1930s WILPF had a membership of about 250 across branches in Melbourne, Hobart, Newcastle and Rockhampton, and leader Eleanor Moore noted:

we have never made a push to obtain a large membership, finding that we can work to better effect with a small band of thoroughly convinced pacifists than with a large gathering of uncertain ones.¹⁶



Judy Horacek cartoon: Centenary Gift to WILPF Australia.

Source: Used with permission of Jenny Darling.

¹⁶ Moore to Drevet, 11 August 1931, series III reel 54, 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.

It is difficult to determine through the archives the extent of involvement of the branch rank and file, those women who attended meetings and paid dues but were not the prominent letter writers or minute takers. As is characteristic of voluntary organisations, it was the women of the executive who took on most of the work to which their names were signed. Yet, driven by the most passionate, the group was still sustained by the enthusiasm of a much broader cohort who lent what time and funds they could in often constrained circumstances.

The wider impact of the Australian section's activism, considering their modest place in national affairs, is difficult to quantify. As a history based on memoir and archives, this book has not specifically analysed the broader public perceptions of WILPF or sought to provide a full account of its policy impacts. Internationally, however, WILPF remains a significant organisation worthy of study as it boasts being one of the oldest international peace organisations in the world and it pioneered a style of advocacy that brought a cohort of women into international affairs. Close examination of their operating style also demonstrates the practical tensions that have plagued the women's movement throughout the twentieth century, and how different sections of the movement interacted with contradicting but arguably justifiable forms of applying evolving feminist theory. Today, it prides itself on being one of the oldest NGOs, gaining consultative status with the League of Nations in the 1920s and formalising its position with the UN in 1948.¹⁷ The longevity of the organisation has been due to its adaptability, the international organising structure, and its core focus of women's empowerment, peace and freedom, which were major concerns of the twentieth century. While today a challenge remains of building membership and making the transition to more digital engagement, its strength continues to lie in the organisation's willingness to engage with all issues through a gendered lens.

War memorials and other well-funded war commemorations maintain the importance of honouring individuals, and WILPF women too recognised each person who worked for peace. From early in WILPF's history, the women of WILPF tried to document peace workers to match the honour rolls of the military, with Margaret Nimmo's death in 1933 prompting the tribute: 'we salute her indomitable spirit as it passes from among us, and

17 Mary Meyer, 'The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom: Organizing Women for Peace in the War System', in *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, ed. Elisabeth Prügl and Mary K Meyer (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 110.

are proud to inscribe her name on the lasting Honour Roll of the Heroines of Peace.¹⁸ Looking at the history of WILPF as an organisation over time reveals how an alternative world order has been imagined and pursued by actors who sat far from the levers of formal power. Their example encourages us to look beyond the militarism that has been so normalised in public life, despite the certainty of its destructive results.

18 *Peacewards*, 1 July 1933, Box 1731/6 Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

This text is taken from *Sisters in Peace: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia, 1915–2015*, by Kate Laing, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.