

REFLECTION FROM THE FIELD: Imagining peace – One hundred years of WILPF in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has been active in Aotearoa New Zealand for 100 years, working for peace and security through challenging the causes of war and its root causes of violence, while working to dismantle structures of gendered power – patriarchal, economic, political, and military. Geographically positioned in the south-west Pacific, WILPF Aotearoa has grown over the decades into a clear sense of Pacific identity and is now part of an extensive Asia/Pacific region in WILPF's regional structure. In this reflection, we look to our formative influences, examine how our organisation currently functions – locally and internationally – and consider what might serve us well for the future in Aotearoa New Zealand. We draw on current International Vice-President Catia Confortini's analysis of a feminist critical methodology and the tool of 'feminist compassion' in the development of WILPF as an international organisation. We acknowledge, as our foremothers did, that our work will always require 'the most strenuous and adventurous effort of mind and spirit'.

Keywords

Pacific NGO, peace studies, women's studies, Aotearoa NGO

Introduction

To imagine peace and work to bring it about by inventing and empowering mechanisms of co-operation, sharing, mediation and negotiation between individuals, communities and states. (WILPF, 2015, p. 5)

A little over 100 years ago, in April 1915, women from Europe and the USA journeyed to The Hague to discuss ways to stop the fighting in Europe. British women planning to join them were prevented from crossing the channel to attend the meeting by the British government. Following the congress, groups of women visited the governments of both the warring and the neutral countries to ask them to negotiate a speedy end to what would become World War I (WWI). In April 2015, women from around the world, including a group from Aotearoa New Zealand, again gathered in The Hague to celebrate the centennial of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), reaffirming WILPF's work for peace and security through challenging the causes of war.

WILPF Aotearoa has always had a relatively small membership of up to 200 women, and currently has active branches in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. We are entirely self-funding. Our geographic positioning in the south-west Pacific, Te Moana nui a Kiwa, means our most immediate local relationships and interests are in the Pacific region. WILPF Aotearoa, and the women of WILPF's 32 sections around the world, work to support International WILPF at its offices in Geneva and New York. The work is structured around four programmes: human rights, disarmament, women, peace and security, and environment. An important on-going focus is the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Because of our small numbers in Aotearoa New Zealand, all of our work is done through networking with other women's and human rights groups. We have more recently made a commitment to acknowledge the needs of women with

physical disabilities and network where we can with related groups.

We reflect here on 100 years of WILPF in Aotearoa New Zealand, remembering the perspectives of very early members, considering the role of what newly elected WILPF International Vice-President, Catia Confortini describes as 'intelligent compassion' in the development of the organisation, and looking to the future to consider what might serve the organisation well.

Reflecting on formative influences

The roots of WILPF Aotearoa lay in the women's suffrage movement and anti-war groups, amongst which there was overlapping membership. It is unclear when WILPF was first established in New Zealand, but it was active by early 1916 when a branch was set up in Auckland by Annette D'Arcy Hamilton and Marianne Jones. Until 1919, it was known by the shorter version of its name, the Women's International League (WIL).

Much of the New Zealand WIL's opposition to WWI was expressed through invoking women's role as mothers. The Wellington Women's Anti-Conscription League, soon to become the Wellington branch of the WIL, referred to its members' special interest as mothers in opposing conscription, and argued against militarism when the Military Service Bill, which allowed for conscription, was introduced to parliament in June 1916. They voiced their opposition in the pages of the *Maoriland Worker*, asserting that 'The mothers among us revolt against the idea that there is no better use for their sons than to be compulsorily sacrificed to militarism, war and wholesale slaughter' (WIL, 1916 June 14, p. 2). In a letter to the *Evening Post*, Sarah Beck, the secretary of WIL's Wellington branch, wrote:

Let the women of the world demand that national disputes in future shall be settled by peaceable methods rather than by the shedding of precious blood, and they will have accomplished a work worthy of the highest ideals of womanhood and their children will bless them (Beck, 1916, p. 2).

In her history of WILPF in New Zealand, Betty Holt (1985) writes that in the early years much of the membership was drawn from the New Zealand Labour Party, though the group disassociated itself from the party in 1930 to attract more members. As part of an international disarmament effort organised by WILPF International under the slogan 'War is Renounced – Let Us Renounce Armaments', Aotearoa New Zealand members collected 42,000 signatures for the petition, which they presented to a public meeting on disarmament held at the Auckland Town Hall in 1931. The petition was part of a huge international petition presented to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference in 1933.

During the 1930s Depression, members held many discussions on the position of unemployed girls and women and the discrimination they suffered in getting unemployment relief. The group worked closely with the Auckland Unemployed Women's Association on the issue. This focus is a reflection not only of the group's close links with the Labour party but also of the interests of WILPF Aotearoa's secretary at the time, Emily Gibson, who had a long involvement in the labour movement. (Hutching, 2012)

During World War II (WWII), the New Zealand section of WILPF ceased operating; it was revived through the 1955 visit of the president of the British section, Kathleen Lonsdale. The Aotearoa New Zealand women's stance opposing militarism and nuclear weapons was clear in a 1958 letter to the prime minister supporting his protest against possible dumping of nuclear waste in the Pacific (Holt, 1985). Spurred on by the war in Vietnam, WILPF women in Aotearoa New Zealand developed resources for children to learn non-violent alternatives to conflict, and visited schools to run training sessions, a pioneer initiative that continued over some years and was later taken up by an education programme run in schools under the Education Department (Holt, 1985).

Catia Confortini (2012, p. 45) argues that WILPF International, particularly in the 3 decades after WWII, was able to ‘carve out its own agency within a structure that bounded it’ through using a feminist critical methodology. Part of that methodology is a tool that enables dominant groups to hear and make sense of silenced and marginalised voices. She borrows the phrase ‘intelligent compassion’ used by an American WILPF woman in 1968. Intelligent compassion, she explains, ‘fosters the enactment of a feminist ethics of care which is necessary to a full sceptical scrutiny of entrenched ideas, thus enabling an agency that challenges structural constraints’ (2012, p. 115). Confortini demonstrates the importance of intelligent compassion as an essential tool that has contributed to enabling WILPF women to overcome the limits of their social positioning – mainly White and middle-to-upper class – to participate in effective social change (2012, p. 115). As an organisation, it was able to do this by following the guiding criteria in its constitution and pursuing deliberative inquiry and sceptical scrutiny, while paying attention to the role of social critics.

WILPF International responded to national liberation movements, racist regimes, and decolonisation, reformulating its understandings of the causes of violence and of the meanings of peace, but remaining faithful to its founding principles (Confortini, 2012). This has been reflected in WILPF Aotearoa in its consistent support for Māori self-determination and in its work of raising the issue of indigenous rights at the international level of WILPF. We have been able to facilitate Maori WILPF members’ access to United Nations human rights bodies and networks in New York and Geneva through WILPF International’s established relationships with these organisations. The New Zealand section changed its name in the 1980s to WILPF Aotearoa, a reflection of our growing sense of Pacific identity, as recognition of the rights of tangata whenua and to acknowledge Māori struggle for self-determination.

WILPF Aotearoa has consistently opposed militarism and, since WWII, we have supported anti-nuclear activity, working for Aotearoa New Zealand’s anti-nuclear legislation, which passed into law in 1985. We supported and helped finance the development of a ‘women’s budget’ in which it was suggested that the costs of military spending on frigates and planes should be redirected towards hospitals and health services (Limit, 1993).¹ In a recent submission to the New Zealand Defence Force review, we argued that ‘with their entrenched masculine norms and patriarchal attitudes ... militaries do not enhance gender equality. They promote a culture of violence and maintain existing structures that foster conflict.’ (Hutching, 2015, p. 3). This submission suggests that a genuinely independent and positive foreign policy would focus on diplomatic initiatives, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and other areas that are aimed at preventing armed conflict.

Our work in regional groups

Each of our three branches has its own focus. Wellington engages more directly with the machinery of government, often participating in select committee reviews and co-ordinating submissions to government. Christchurch/Otautahi has organised a memorial commemoration for the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for over 30 years, valiantly continuing to do so after the earthquakes in 2011. Attracting wide community support, including from members of the Japanese community in Christchurch, they have floated lanterns on the Avon River and, more recently, met at the Peace Bell in the botanical gardens when the river was off limits because of earthquake damage. The Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland branch has had consistent involvement with Māori and Pacific issues, with a particular focus on educating Pākehā about the Treaty of Waitangi (Holt, 1985). WILPF, in association with Nga Wahine

Pacifica, provided significant support for a Pacific Conference and Court for Violence against Women and the Land, held in Auckland in 1999, which addressed violence against women as a consequence of colonisation of the Pacific. Another initiative was for younger WILPF women to work with Melanesian women in Bougainville, and for WILPF to support the 2004 publication of the book *As mothers of the land: The birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace and Freedom* (Sirivi & Havini, 2004), which recorded women's experiences of the civil war in Bougainville in the 1990s. WILPF also contributed to funding a series of interviews, *Pacific women speak out for independence and denuclearisation* (Ishtar, 1998) as a way of enabling the voices and the stories of indigenous women working for justice around the Pacific to be heard more widely. Māori members have joined WILPF since the 1970s, including our vice-president, Pauline Tangiora, who has for decades tried to raise awareness of the need for more indigenous women's voices to be heard at an international WILPF level. WILPF Polynesia, led by indigenous women, submitted a remit at The Hague meeting in 2015 that nuclear testing by the French was a crime against humanity. However, there is still wide scope for applying the tool of intelligent compassion within WILPF, because the voices of many indigenous women around the world are yet to be heard at an international level.

The Pacific focus continues today through WILPF International's commitment to a tighter regional structure as a way for women in the sections to communicate with the international offices and vice versa. Consequently, WILPF Aotearoa is a part of an extensive Asia/Pacific region that includes Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Japan, Micronesian island states, Melanesian island states, Australia, and Polynesia.

Our strengths

WILPF Aotearoa's strength lies in being part of an international organisation that has formal consultative status with the United Nations and that offers internships to young women to work in the Geneva and New York offices to enable them to become familiar with the United Nations-based work and WILPF's work with sections around the world. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, we offer younger women opportunities to be mentored by women with both national and international experience in the organisation, many of whom have worked for social justice in varied ways for many decades.

Looking to the future

For 100 years, we have been imagining peace and peaceful possibilities and working towards them through the United Nations and our international offices and local groups. There have been questions more recently within WILPF International about how much energy should be directed to United Nations structures, as there seems less 'transformative space' (Confortini, 2012, p. 134) within these structures. The access to the United Nations, which we have seen as our strength, now increasingly seems a constraint and a challenge, as do the more formal organisational aspects of international WILPF.

Our local organisation is run through regular meetings and payments of annual subscriptions, but attendance at meetings and yearly membership payments do not appeal to many younger women. The future for WILPF Aotearoa lies perhaps in the development of a strong parallel Young WILPF (YWILPF) network that might communicate primarily through electronic methods and meet together to organise for specific purposes and projects, while maintaining contact with one of the geographic groups. There is a model available in an active Melbourne-

based YWILPF group. Making better use of electronic web-based communications system will be essential as women who are active through internet networks express their ‘inclusivity, sceptical scrutiny and intelligent compassion [...] in solidarity and shared actions,’ rather than deliberations more commonly engaged in, in previous decades. They use ‘horizontal leadership modes’ and ‘work synergistically with international and national members’ (Confortini, 2012, p. 135).

Closer ties with high school and university groups around Aotearoa New Zealand need to be developed, while networking with women’s and other human rights groups in this country and around the Asia–Pacific region will be a continuing focus of our work here. We envisage that work related to environmental sustainability may become a higher priority in the future. At the recent congress in The Hague, WILPF Aotearoa members publicised the rising waters of the Pacific, lobbying for the category of ‘climate refugee’ to be recognised in international law. The latter was successfully adopted as part of WILPF’s international programme. A new dedicated environmental programme was called for and accepted at The Hague congress, reflecting worldwide concern about the natural environment.

WILPF’s kaupapa moving into the future will still be based on an integrated approach to human security and the understanding that to achieve sustainable peace we need to challenge the root causes of violence and war, dismantle the structure of gendered power (patriarchal, economic, political, and military), demilitarise, and build inclusive societies based on gender equality and participation. While an updated manifesto, accepted at the April 2015 centennial congress in The Hague, has refocused the work, the issues of peace and freedom, or social justice, still underpin our work as we strive for a world without violence, where women and girls have equal participation in all areas of their lives. We understand too, as our foremothers did, that our work will always require ‘the most strenuous and adventurous effort of mind and spirit.’ (WIL, 1916 December 13, p. 12).

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Notes

1 Limit was a Wellington-based women’s peace group.

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