

# International Women's Peace Movements

[Annika WILMERS](#)

## ABSTRACT

International women's peace movements took on different forms: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, internationally minded women pacifists often initially built contacts between two or three countries. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, international organisational structures were established. Moreover, some existing international women's organisations turned towards peace work in the mid-1920s and 1930s. After 1945, European women's peace work was confronted with new political constellations and global perspectives. Campaigning against the arms race led to new activities which were less formally organised but influenced female pacifism in many countries. In feminist pacifist discourse, peace was always linked to other topics which were seen as reciprocal, influential and highly important for future peacekeeping, such as women's rights, democracy, nutrition and socioeconomic contexts, education or environmentalism.



Platform at the International Congress of Women at The Hague, April 1915. Sixth person from the left side: Jane Addams (President of the Congress), LSE Library.



"Women of Europe in Action for Peace" Conference, organized by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom ; WILPF), on

The combination of the women's and the peace movement as a visible international phenomenon is primarily an outcome of World War I, although initiatives had already existed where women strove for a women's peace movement with international dimensions. Linkage of the peace and the women's movement did not happen as a matter of course. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many women had supported one or the other without necessarily seeing a connection between the two while others chose to work in both movements. An example is French pacifist Jeanne Mélin (1877-1964) whose pacifism and feminism became more radical in the course of World War I. Some of the peace societies founded affiliated women's organisations with the aim to spread peace work among women (e.g. *The Women's Auxiliary of the Peace Society* in England in 1882 or the *Frauenbund der Deutschen Friedensgesellschaft* in Germany in 1914).

Women who strove for internationalism were convinced that the characteristics of motherhood and motherly tasks (nourishing, protection, and education of children) united women across national borders. This argument should prove to be the most important trump card of the women's peace movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Early initiatives for transnational women's peace work can be found from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century on. After the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, the American Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) called for a Mother's Peace Day, which in 1873 was celebrated for the first time in several American cities as well as in England, Switzerland, Italy and France. Two other early, but short-lived initiatives to organize women for peace were taken by Swiss Marie Goegg (1826-1899) in 1868 and by Eugénie Potonié-Pierre (1844-1898) and Ellen Robinson (1840-1912), founders of *L'Union internationale des femmes pour la paix* in 1891. In Paris, Gabrielle Wiesniewska (1836-1903) founded the *Alliance universelle des femmes pour la paix et pour le désarmement* in 1896, to which a Norwegian and a Belgian branch were added in the following years. In 1899, German Margarethe Leonore Selenka (1860-1922) initiated peace manifestations of women in several countries on the occasion of the First Hague Peace Conference.

International peace work was no matter of priority for the two bigger international women's organisations, the *International Council of Women* (founded in 1888), and the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* (founded in 1904) before 1914, compared to other urgent topics such as girls' education, female labour or women's suffrage. Several of the members, however, sympathised with the peace movement and both organizations also held meetings in the interest of peace. The majority of the members from both international organizations came from Europe and North America. Bertha von Suttner (1843-1914), founding member of the Austrian and the German Peace Societies, vice president of the International Peace Bureau and Nobel Peace Laureate in 1905, for example, spoke at the founding congress of the IWSA in Berlin. After the outbreak of World War I, the vast majority of the women's movements supported the war efforts of their home countries, whereas a new and small pacifist branch came to life and organised an international congress of women; more than 1100 participants convened in The Hague in April 1915. Apart from the Netherlands (two leading women were Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) and Rosa Manus (1881-1942)), participants came from the United States (Jane Addams (1860-1935), Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1931, presided the congress), Canada, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Great Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Austria and Hungary. They demanded political equality as well as the implementation of democracy in politics as necessary preconditions to a peaceful future. The women also asked for a mediation conference organised by neutral countries. In March 1915, a group of 25 socialist women from Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, France and Switzerland met in Bern for an international conference to protest against the war. They were linked to the *International Socialist Women's Committee* which had been organised by Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) in 1907.

The Hague Congress gave birth to the *International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace* (renamed as *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, WILPF, in 1919). In World War I, the WILPF included sixteen national sections (among them the French section surrounding Gabrielle Duchêne, 1878-1954), having grown to forty-two sections one hundred years later. Following the second congress held in Zurich in 1919 (condemnation of the treaties of Versailles), the WILPF opened an office in Geneva, where the League of Nations was located. From the mid-20s on, other international women's organisations also shifted their attention to peace work and the

League of Nations. For the World Disarmament Conference in 1932, the women's movements collected some eight million signatures in more than 50 countries asking for universal disarmament. In the following years, female pacifists from all over Europe campaigned against the visible threat of war, often struggling over strategies vis-à-vis the rise of fascism, totalitarianism, and communism, before National Socialism and World War II hit the movement and forced many pacifists to remain silent and/or to emigrate. In Geneva, the WILPF was engaged in supporting political refugees.

In the period following 1945, global topics increasingly entered the agenda of European women's peace work. Until the early 90s, the Cold War was a crucial factor. Wars between European states and their colonies, the Vietnam War and the foundation of the United Nations also redefined the frame for international peace work. The WILPF, officially recognised as an NGO, opened a second office in New York. The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the four United Nations World Conferences on Women promoted transnational networking among women's peace organisations. The East-West divide was also evident in the international women's peace movement: Organisations with a socialist and communist background were represented by the *Women's International Democratic Federation* (founded in 1945, headquarters moved from Paris to East Berlin in 1951 and to Sao Paulo in 1992).

Influenced by the civil rights movement in the US, the 1960s witnessed new types of activities: *Women Strike for Peace* (founded in the US in 1961, an international branch followed) or *Voice of Women* (founded in Canada in 1960, in the US and Great Britain in 1961) were grassroots movements that many pacifists considered to be more attractive than the older and comparatively more elite organisations. The 1970s and 80s saw the rise of peace walks and peace camps (e.g. the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp 1981-2000). In 1980, Danish women founded *Women for Peace*, a movement without formal leader- or membership that soon spread to other Scandinavian countries, campaigning and petitioning against nuclear arms and organising Peace Marches (e.g. from Copenhagen to Paris in 1981 or from Stockholm to Minsk in 1982). In the 1980s, the WILPF organised the "Stop the Arms Race Campaign" and the "Great Peace Journey".

Finally, transnational women's peace work can be found in those regions in Europe where wars and military conflicts actually took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in Northern Ireland, *Women Together* was founded in the 1960s and in 1976, Betty Williams (born 1943) and Mairead Corrigan-Maguire (born 1944) received the Nobel Peace Prize for having initiated *Women for Peace* (later *Community for Peace People*). In former Yugoslavia an offshoot of *Women in Black* came to life in the 1990s, a movement campaigning in conflict zones worldwide (first acting in Israel in 1988), and Greek and Turkish women founded *Winpeace* in 1996.

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