

Women peacebuilders: transforming the system from the inside out?

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Catia Confortini

Navigating between cooperation and confrontation vis-à-vis institutions of power, as [WILPF](#) approaches its centenary it must continue to avoid cooptation into a system that produces the violence it abhors.

The history of the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) (WILPF) raises critical questions about the extent to which a major international organization can, with origins strongly rooted in liberalism, engage radical forces working for social transformation to make key differences in the international system. Is co-optation by the very structures it aims to critique inevitable? Or can managed co-optation provide access and venues for outsiders who may never have obtained a voice “within?” Because of the contradictory ideologies WILPF embraced from the start (inherent in the tensions among different types of liberalism and socialism, as described below) the organization remained uncomfortable both within the arenas of power and without.

Founded in the [progressive era](#), WILPF saw peace as a consequence of the institutionalization of universal norms of social, political and economic cooperation and governance. This progressivist strand advocated for women’s full enjoyment of civil and political rights, total and universal disarmament, and an economic system based on needs, rather than profits. Some of these objectives were predicated on the ideological values of liberal thought: individual liberty, free trade, the protection of private property, limited state intervention in the economy, and liberal democracy. Like many other organizations of its era in the West, WILPF believed that its goals, peace paramount, could be achieved through the establishment of strong international organizations with mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes between states.

Critics of liberalism like [Milly Williamson](#), however, reveal its pernicious aspects as tightly linked to the violence of colonialism and the domination of people of color. During the Cold War in particular, liberalism existed symbiotically with global militarization and militarism, the arms race and the [hegemonic project of the United States](#). The 1970s brought (neo)liberal economic deregulation, disengagement of the state from social welfare, the privatization of markets for social goods and commodities, and the expansion of export-oriented production in the global south. This shift compromised local needs, increasing economic inequality, the feminization of poverty and structural violence. More recently a number of military interventions have been justified in the name of liberal values, including women’s rights (for example US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq). As a [contested project](#), the liberalism of privilege, or elite liberalism, has, however, always coexisted with egalitarian, progressive, and inclusive strands.

WILPF’s origins in the [suffrage](#) and [social work movements](#) situated the group at the border between these two frequently conflicting ideological strands and, yet positioned it to challenge, theoretically and practically, the liberalism of the powerful. Presiding over the [1915 meeting](#) at The Hague that established the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (WILPF’s original name until 1919), and later becoming WILPF’s first International President, social work pioneer [Jane Addams](#) embodied both types of liberalism. Addams, for example, offered in her numerous writings a sharp social justice-focused analysis of the immigrant condition in urban centers in both Great Britain and the US, yet this analysis led to liberal reformist projects such as the founding and operation of [Hull House and the settlement movement in the US](#). WILPF also owed its origins to transnationally-organized

Socialist and pacifist movements. [Emily Greene Balch](#), WILPF's first International Secretary, was a passionate pacifist and more consistent socialist whose writings denounced U.S. immigration and economic policies, imperialism, and militarism. Balch's more radical ideological stand led to her firing by the trustees of [Wellesley College](#) where she taught sociology and economics for her pacifist stand during World War I.

The height of the modern liberal era was arguably the late 1940s and 1950s. At this time, WILPF participated in the liberal international system in ideologically ambivalent ways, working within the United Nations but never trusting it fully. For example, as soon as WILPF was granted UN consultative status, Gertrude Baer, a German Jew who fled the Nazis from Germany to Switzerland, then to the United States, became WILPF's representative. Initially trusting the UN [Trusteeship Council](#) to move the territories under its jurisdiction slowly toward independence, Baer worked to remain true to the voice and critiques of organizations in the so-called Third World, attending the First Asian–African Conference in [Bandoeng](#) in 1955, the First All-African People's Conference in [Accra](#) in 1958, and the 2nd UN [Conference of Nongovernment Organizations on the Eradication of Prejudice and Discrimination](#) in 1959. These meetings of recently or soon-to-be decolonized states, as well as more informal conversations on the ground, bolstered her critique of the UN's engagement with colonial powers as imbued with the racist paternalism characteristic of elite liberalism. Nonetheless, Baer and other WILPF leaders walked a precarious edge.

By the end of the 1950s, some WILPF leaders clearly sympathized with independence struggles, non-violent ones in particular, while others did not. The former criticized the West for labeling revolutionary movements in decolonizing countries as “Communist-inspired” and for supporting dictatorial colonial powers “rather than ...the struggles for freedom and independence” (*XVIIIth International Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, 1970, Swarthmore College Peace Collection). Baer's reports were instrumental in the reassessment of WILPF's policies toward decolonization and independence movements and, while it took almost a decade for the organization to call for immediate independence, in 1971 WILPF issued a [statement](#) supporting struggles for independence, and declaring it “a human right to resist injustice and to be neither silent witness nor passive victim of repression.” The process of getting to this statement is indicative of the edge WILPF constantly negotiated, within itself and with the world around it, between liberally-aligned positions and more radical, transformational ones.

During the [UN Decade for Women](#), a transformational time for the feminist movement worldwide, WILPF participated in UN women's conferences fully, assuming leadership roles there and in the organization of the mid-decade parallel NGO conference in Copenhagen in 1980. In the Nairobi and Beijing NGO Conferences, WILPF set up Peace Tents, drawing women to share experiences about conflicts in their societies. WILPF, however, [went a step further](#), joining [critiques](#) of those first conferences [for depoliticizing and failing to account for of the situations of Third World Women](#). WILPF further critiqued the conferences for not confronting imperialism, racism, and the impact of the international economic system on women's lives, rejecting the isolation of women's oppression from other forms of oppression. WILPF also worked with organizations that refused to be part of the UN framework (for example the [Women's International Democratic Federation](#) and the [Pan African Women's Organization](#)) and remained active in antimilitarist and disarmament movements, from [Women Strike for Peace](#) in the 1960s to [Women's Pentagon Action](#) and the [women's peace encampments](#) in the 1980s. WILPF consistently denounced the human and developmental costs of arms manufacturing and use, global militarization and war.

These collaborations and ongoing joint pressure led to the formation of the coalition of women's organizations responsible for the adoption in 2000 of [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) and eventually for the establishment of the [Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda](#). Resolution 1325, however, came with controversy. Many agreed it was a tremendous achievement of [feminist activism](#), and a landmark for women because it recognized women's multiple roles and vulnerabilities in armed conflict, their importance to peacemaking, and the need to adopt gender perspectives in all aspects of UN programming and peace operations. Critics simultaneously cited

1325 as an example of [WILPF's cooptation into the liberal \(and militarized\) system](#). They argued that WILPF importantly predicated women's inclusion to peace processes and peace talks but simultaneously lacked a solid critique of the gendered power relations maintained within the liberal vision of peace. Indeed, critics question whether contemporary peace processes truly attend to a radical prevention of armed conflict and the elimination of war -- the fundamental missions of WILPF. Liberal peace processes, critics claim, largely focus on the creation of liberal governance institutions in areas marred by conflict, embedded in a neo-liberal (and also highly militarized) international system . Such processes do not create foundations for the elimination of structural violence and/or of the possibility of violence in general. 1325 therefore falls short of critiquing neoliberal capitalism, and the role of neocolonial exploitation in the creation of the conditions for conflict. Moreover, its incorporation into structures like NATO and domestic militaries points toward the cooptation of the feminist peace agenda for militarist purposes. These are dilemmas that WILPF, an organization straddling between faith and skepticism in liberal institutions, confronts at every step, risking cooptation in order to continually engage critically with the global governance system.

Nonetheless, WILPF and its partners in this coalition have succeeded in moving and shaking the Security Council, opening a breach to pursue transformative agendas. A world devoid of 1325 would present an entirely new repertoire of problems and failures. Some degree of co-optation enabled WILPF to push the limits of what was possible within liberal structures thus opening avenues for broader (as yet unrealized) transformation.

The strength of WILPF has always been its ability to navigate between radical and liberal politics, remaining comfortable in its uneasiness, not fully planted here or there. WILPF's strength lies in this uneasiness. Without it, the organization is in danger of full cooptation and of becoming too comfortable with a position of moderate influence in the avenues of power. As it moves between these interstices, WILPF must remain conscious that the structures within which it operates are those that, in many circumstances, support and/or cause the violence the organization abhors. WILPF needs to retain that critical edge, particularly in these times where the neo-liberal project insists on pushing for the [cooptation of feminism](#) for its exclusive purposes.

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