

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Why do we need women's peace organizations to work for the transformation of society and for a peaceful and just world? Why do we need WILPF? In marking 80 years of consistent effort for justice, non-violence, peace and freedom, WILPF opens a reflection and discussion of the subject.

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Women's Movements for Social Change: Social Feminism and Equity Feminism

The political and economic modernization processes of the last two centuries, paralleled by rising levels of militarization and social violence, have impacted women's status in varying ways - some for the better, and many for the worse. Prospects for the fundamental systems transformation required to end patriarchy seem far off. Yet women are today, as they have always been, both victims and shapers of the societies of which they are a part. Much of the activity of women's movements in the 20th Century has been (correctly) focused on ending the victim role and establishing gender equity, a necessary condition for and concomitant of the removal of all forms of structural and behavioral oppression and violence. However, the other persisting focus in women's culture historically and in the present has been on women as agents of social transformation, as creators of the future.

There is a special reason for giving more attention to the transformational role today, considering the growing doubt and despair about the possibility of any significant human betterment. There is a widening gap between the rhetoric of equity feminism and the actual life conditions of women and men in both the Two-Thirds World and the One-third World. What Naomi Black (1989) calls social feminism, which might also be thought of as feminist humanism (Pauline Johnson, 1994) focuses on the broader social malformations that produce the oppression of both genders

and all ages. It is an acknowledgment of women's culture as a resource for human survival, growth and development throughout human history.

In the past, a relatively localist scale of social organization meant that women developed a fairly comprehensive understanding of their bio-social environments and had a substantial repertoire of adaptive and rebuilding behaviors for recurring crises of drought, flood and inter-group hostilities. They had support networks shielded by ceremonial and ritual activities that operated independently of the support networks of men and were always available in times of need.

By the 19th Century industrialization had produced a new middle class of education and dependent women whose leisure enabled them to join elite women in an awakening to the victimage and oppression of the poor. They quickly identified dangerous working conditions, bad housing, low wages, low skills, poor health and the anodyne of alcohol as creating a vicious cycle of poverty for urban and rural poor, and war as an overriding destroyer of the quality of life for all. It took some decades of activity on behalf of the urban poor for middle class women to realize that they could not act independently to remove economic and social injustice because they had no civil status, no decision-making power.

The rise of the suffrage movement in the countries of the North meant for many women a narrowing of the focus on social ills to the wrongs suffered by women. This left standing in the wings, so to speak, the women reformers who had been galvanized by the evil effects of war, colonialism and unbridled capitalism on the world as a whole. Children came to be seen as part of the social burden unfairly born by women rather than as small human beings to be liberated from the double trap of patriarchal violence and maternal exhaustion.

It is important to remember, however, that social or humanist feminism preceded the development of the narrower equity feminism, its roots secure in a more transcontinental soil, and gave rise to a number of women's transnational groups in the 1880s and 1890s. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as the World YWCA, the International Council of Women, the International Council of Nurses and many others were already formed and at work in Asia, Africa and the Americas, as well as in Europe, before the 20th Century, working for the education and welfare of women and children as part of a larger effort to create a peaceful and just international order.

During WWI a gathering at The Hague of activist and professional women issued a proposal for mediation among their warring states, and were early promoters of what was to become the League of Nations. They formed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to explore structures and strategies for peace building. A new level of effort

became possible after WWII when the United Nations established a Committee on the Status of Women and the UN Declaration of Human Rights included gender as a protected category.

INGOs developed strategies for being present at UN events such as the conferences on population, development, disarmament, the environment and human rights, and since the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico City have moved from *ad hoc* activities to formal inputs to UN programs. Policy-makers can no longer ignore the gender dimension whatever the global problem being discussed. Women's transnational networks are now multiplying so rapidly that it is impossible to come up with an accurate count of them at this time.

We are a long way from our pre-industrial village sisters who understood very well the structures and resource systems within which they operated. One of the greatest dangers of our time is despair, and feelings of helplessness in the face of macro-level social forces. The possibility is there that the human race will self-destruct. It is precisely at this historical moment that it can be useful to reflect on the accumulated experience of women's cultures over the centuries in the work of feeding rearing and healing humans, building their social and physical environments, and then rebuilding them after destruction. It was the need for that kind of reflection that led me to take a year of solitude in 1974 and begin the mental journey that led to the writing of *The Underside of History*.

Today, 20 years later, this process of feminist reflection on the social order and its workings is more urgent than ever. Also, more of us are doing it. That development should be celebrated by exploring how women think about the future and the action models they generate to bring these futures into being.