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**RICH IN RESISTANCE:
Women's Activism against War in the San Francisco Bay Area**

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San Francisco and neighbouring areas are a rather unique context for women's activism because this is a place alive with varied subcultures, where minorities are often boldly expressive and get a better hearing than elsewhere. There are, for a start, people of a wide range of ethnic minorities, including first and earlier generations of migrants from across the Pacific. There's a Jewish population, which includes both religious and secular Jews, American and Israeli Jews, Jews of pro-Sharon and anti-Sharon opinion. And of course Jews of varying relation to the concept of Zionism.

There's a big LGBTT population here too, and a lot of queer activism. There is for instance a group called Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (QUIT). Lesbians are attracted to live here because it feels good to be part of a visible and vibrant lesbian culture. However, even if it's outshone by the flamboyancy of alternative cultures, the mainstream, conservative-to-fundamentalist, body of US opinion is also represented on the West Coast and its presence is felt as soon as you take an anti-Bush message onto the streets.

During a visit to the San Francisco Bay Area in California in May 2004 I had a chance to meet women involved with three Women in Black groups. I also had a chance to talk with three individual women active in this same context, who were able to give me a perspective on the organizations in question and the West Coast world of which they are a part. Finally, I had an interview with Medea Benjamin, one of the coordinators of the women's antiwar network Code Pink.¹ (Please see acknowledgments at the end of this paper.)

My profile starts with straightforward descriptions of the three WiB groups and their activities. You will see that they vary in subject matter, style and emphasis. I then explore some specific contrasts of analysis around Israel and Palestine, which, as you will see, is a major motivating and differentiating issue for the three groups. I then take the second major theme of WiB activism: the linked issues of the war on terror, the invasion of Iraq, and US militarism / imperialism. Here I refer to WiB again, but also introduce Code Pink.

¹ I also made a preliminary contact during this visit to San Francisco with women of the East Asia, US, Puerto Rico Women against Militarism Network. Since I had an occasion to deepen my acquaintance with this group at their conference in Manila in November 2004, I shall write about them at length in a separate Profile.

Doing WiB differently

There are said to be as many as twenty Women in Black 'chapters' (as they sometimes call them) in California. Since I interviewed women of only three of these, all in the Bay Area, please bear in mind that I missed more than I saw. The groups I spent time with are known as Berkeley WiB, San Francisco WiB and Bay Area WiB.

Berkeley Women in Black

Berkeley WiB hold a weekly vigil at the south entrance to the University of California campus. Seven of the group welcomed me at Vivian's home and told me about their activity. They were: Hilda, Jane, Juanita, Marcella, Marina, Mary and Vivian herself. You can see them, and sometimes up to six or seven more women, on any Friday between noon and 1 pm, standing beside their banner and leafleting the passers-by, who include shoppers, students and often groups of highschool kids coming to look over the University.

Berkeley WiB aim for silence and dignity on their vigils. But (as Vivian put it) 'we're a rebellious lot' and anyway the calm is liable to be interrupted by hecklers. For all that, the vigils are normally 'peaceful and friendly'. Enough so, at least, for Mary to be able to say of these hours on the pavement, 'It's my spiritual practice'. The regularity of the vigil is, in fact, all they need to hold the group together. Organization is otherwise minimal. They keep in contact by phone. Agreeing the content of the leaflet is not problematic, because the front page is fairly constant (demands relating to Israel/Palestine) and the changing material on the reverse is simply drafted by Juanita, checked out with Jane. Others are encouraged to write or find an article for the week.

The seven women of the core group are all white Americans. The youngest is around 55 years, and Hilda, the much respected oldest member, is 88. As a young girl she was a volunteer nurse with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. She went to help the Spanish people in their fight against the fascists in the Spanish civil war. Though some of the group may be lesbians, this is not an overt part of the group's political identity. Similarly, although three of the seven women I met have some relationship to Judaism, they aren't acting politically as Jews in this group. It's symptomatic, I think, that when I asked about Jewish membership somebody, after a pause, said 'I assume some are, but I don't know'. I only stress this point because of the contrast with Bay Area WiB, of which I shall write in a moment.

It's significant too, because Israel/Palestine is the principle focus of the Berkeley vigil.² Women in Black vigils started in Israel soon after the Palestinians began their 1987 *intifada*. In November 1988 a group of concerned secular and religious Jewish women in Berkeley established a vigil in solidarity with the women in Jerusalem and against the Occupation, taking

² They have however also protested at the Mexican Consulate concerning the murders of women in Juarez and Chihuahua; and at the Colombian Consulate in support of Ruta Pacifica, concerning the conditions faced by women in Colombia. They have worked with Students for Justice in Palestine.

the same name: Women in Black. However, while researching the roots of Women in Black for a talk she was asked to give in Palo Alto, Jane e-mailed the Jerusalem group to learn more about it. She says

I was shocked to learn that the Jerusalem group had begun as mothers worried about the effect of the Occupation on their sons and daughters in the military.³ Israeli soldiers were beginning to be wounded. They were being protective of their *own* children! In 1988, Rabin was instructing the Israeli soldiers to break the arms and legs of the young Palestinians who were protesting the Occupation. When I realized that there had been no understanding or concern initially for the Palestinian children, I thought I should be standing with the Palestinian liberation movement. [But] as the Jerusalem WiB have grown in their understanding and concern for the Palestinian people, I realized that standing as Women in Black is a process of learning, and that we all have grown and changed, and our understandings have deepened, from vigilling.

When the Oslo peace accords were signed in 1993, many of the Berkeley group felt that peace was close and 'Rabin should have his chance'. The group shrank. Hilda and Jane continued to stand, a persistent vigil of two, for the next seven years. 'Neither of us could take a week off because we needed at least two to hold the banner!' But with the incident of the Temple Mount, followed by the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000, it was clear the peace process had failed, and attendance at the vigils grew again, swelling yet more after 9/11.

Today, Berkeley WiB's position on the Israel/Palestine conflict is, they say, 'defined by' the relatively unchanging front page of their flyer, which states that 'Palestinians are suffering genocide' and contains the following demands.

1. An end to all aid to Israel until violence against Palestinians stops, then aid must be shared equally with Palestinians.
2. An end to the Apartheid system in Israel which keeps Palestinians as second-class citizens. Palestinians and Jews must have equal rights under the law.
3. Right of Return or reparations for Palestinian refugees.
4. An end to the highly militarized settlements, 'Israeli only' highways with their 'safety zones' and checkpoints.
5. Palestinian workers must be allowed to work to survive. No undercutting wages by the importation of foreign workers.
6. An end to collective punishments (curfews and the destruction of homes and olive groves) and an end to the expulsions and imprisonment of adults and children without charges or trials.
7. An international peacekeeping force now!
8. A shared Jerusalem for everyone.

³ This fact was emphatically disputed by another of my informants in San Francisco.

9. Equal access to water for all people.

10. Removal of *all* the Apartheid Wall

This is a set of demands some others are liable to characterize as ‘anti-Zionist’ – though this, as we shall see, is a contested term.

San Francisco Women in Black

SF WiB holds its vigils on the first Friday of the month between 5 and 6 pm at Market and Montgomery, in the financial district of downtown San Francisco - high-rise buildings, high pedestrian traffic. Between twenty and fifty women will attend, and on special occasions, as on International Women’s Day each year, they may draw as many as two hundred. Jennifer Beach, who made time for me on a busy workday morning, with a toddler under one arm, told me: this group were kick-started not by the Israeli Occupation but by the Yugoslav nationalist wars of the early 1990s. Their inspiration was not so much the WiB practice of Jerusalem but that of the women of Belgrade, whose intellectual leadership and unifying strategies they greatly respected.

So it’s logical that, despite three-quarters of their membership being Jewish, SF WiB see the Israel case as only one of several illegitimate occupations – Haiti and Iraq are also named. They see US support for Israel as only one manifestation of an imperialist and militarist foreign policy they deplore. ‘We live in such an alienating country,’ Jennifer said. ‘We feel nobody represents us. Most of us won’t vote for Kerry or for Bush.’

SF WiB’s street presence however features mainly Israel and Palestine. Blazoned across their big banner are the words ‘Stop US Aid to Israel’. This demand, as we shall see, is one that causes grave concern to some anti-Occupation Jews. Jennifer told me, though, that it should be read, as many Jews might read it, not as a death sentence to the Israeli state but rather as saying ‘no support *so long as you are on this road*’. The group may be explicitly anti-Zionist, but this does not mean a wish to sweep Israel into the sea. Even less does it imply anti-semitism. She wrote to me later

We understand that the nation of Israel exists and while we all personally oppose religious governments and fundamentalisms, we’re not interested in challenging the nation’s existence. We’re more concerned about the ways in which that country is manipulated by the United States to destabilize the Middle East, and the ways in which Israel, like the US, glorifies its expansion at the cost of the Palestinians.

Unlike Berkeley WiB, however, SF WiB’s campaigns are not focused only on Israel and Palestine. Their leaflets, at different times, have outspokenly protested against: ethnic aggression; NATO and US bombing; Western failure to protect Kurds, Timorese and others from massacre; the US sending troops to the Philippines; and the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. As US intentions had become clear after the attacks of September 11 these women had felt, Jennifer said

We were at the bottom of a hill with a huge impending avalanche of violence about to descend on history. We were about to see the dawn of a new kind, a new scale of vengeance. Watching the richest country in the world getting set to slaughter the poorest – it filled us with a horrified fear.

They paid for their public stand with harassment from both the public and the authorities. Kate Raphael was investigated by the FBI.

SF WiB are different from Berkeley WiB in other ways too. They are younger: their oldest member, in her middle fifties, is the age of Berkeley's youngest. Several have children in school. It's a friendship group that formed when they were all younger still, active together in the new left, in gay politics and feminist groups, including Women against Imperialism. They have WiB group meetings maybe three times a year to hammer out the politics of their actions, and to review their banners and placards. But they meet each other informally and talk a lot on the phone. Around three-quarters of the group are lesbian feminists. A characteristic leaflet in 2003 calling women to 'wear black and join our powerful, silent vigil' to stop the invasion of Iraq also carried the line: 'dykes for peace, peace for dykes'.

Like Berkeley WiB they aim for silence and dignity, simplicity and sustainability in the vigils. Sometimes a speaker will give a ten minute address at the end. Like other WiB groups they greatly value and respect this mode of political expression that's emerged worldwide, while at the same time knowing there's a limit to what vigils can be expected to achieve. Jennifer explained

It's not that we feel we fail. Just to be here at all is a success, in the tradition of bearing witness. It's just that it's not sufficient to satisfy our own aspirations, let alone realistically address the events in the world.

The thing, I think, that helps them transcend the limitations of 'the vigil form' is going abroad to work with women at the receiving end of US policy. Members have participated in the international solidarity movement in Palestine. And Jennifer and Judith Mirkinson have travelled to the Philippines where they work, in Manila as in San Francisco, with *Gabriela*, the large and long-lived feminist NGO originating in the Philippines Communist Party.

Bay Area Women in Black

Bay Area WiB started in the summer of 2001. Marcia Freedman, a former Knesset member, well known for her political and feminist activism in Israel, was currently in the USA where she was trying to work with Jewish Voice for Peace. Dissatisfied with JVP's 'maleness' at that time and its unenthusiasm for feminist initiatives, she used her address book to call together a group of Jewish women in the Bay Area to organize a Jewish anti-Occupation event for the High Holidays.

Thirteen of these women subsequently decided to remain together as a Jewish feminist women's group, later naming themselves Bay Area Women in Black. Their plan was to use Jewish religious holidays as occasions for reaching into the Jewish community with cultural interventions opposing the Occupation. As one of them later described it to me, 'we arrange careful choreography to reach unusually deep into the heart and soul and spirit of people in the Jewish community'.

The group

I had a chance to meet and talk at some length with four of the thirteen women that currently comprise Bay Area WiB. Penny Rosenwasser is a former musician, radio producer, cultural worker and long-time anti-militarist activist, who is currently employed by a human rights organization, has published a book of interviews with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, and is on the Board of Jewish Voice for Peace. Sandy Butler has earned her livelihood as a fulltime activist and writer on violence against women. She has written important books on incest and breast cancer and is currently writing another in autobiographical vein, on 'the spiritual development of a political activist'. Jane Ariel, by occupation a psychologist, is an Israeli now living in San Francisco. Frances Reid is an artist and Oscar-nominated film maker, producing documentaries that express her passionate concerns on human rights, race and racism, and women's issues.

The group has typically always comprised just such white, middle-class Jewish, lesbian, feminist, politically-experienced women. The youngest of them, today, is in her middle fifties. The group was formed out of a friendship network, most being lesbians. 'That consciousness is reflected,' Sandy says, 'in our understanding of power, oppression and alliances. It is foundational.' Jane said, of San Francisco, 'it's less of an issue here than anywhere in the world'. As to Jewish identity, Sandy describes herself as the only 'practising, born-again, "pious" Jew' in the group. Frances is a non-Jew, but her partner is Jewish, and she is present in the group 'as an active and conscious ally'. The remainder are broadly speaking secular Jews, though with a range of affinities to the religion, the spirituality and the culture.

It is principally Sandy who, mainly through e-mail, keeps the group together and mutually informed. She maintains an e-list of some 700 to 1000 names, to which, after consulting the core group, she sends selected material arriving from external sources. They also use the mail programme on their website. Bay Area WiB differ from Berkeley and SF WiB in the considerable time they devote to talking. 'For us meetings are vital.' Membership involves a commitment to meeting every two weeks, analysing, conceptualising, distributing tasks, drafting leaflets, media work, applying for grants, planning actions, and, afterwards, rigorously evaluating them. (They even have an evaluation form.) They also hold occasional retreats.

Up until the present, this has been a 'closed' group. At certain moments they've lost members - some felt 'it was all too heady, too analytical'. When those who remained realized that energies were failing, they carefully solicited

interest from potential new members. Such choices involved a good deal of discussion, and not a little dread. I asked why they had been so selective – a practice not on the whole very characteristic of WiB groups. ‘We had so much fun together. I felt I just wanted to be with these people’, one answered. And another said, ‘To remain motivated we need to be able to talk shorthand between ourselves, easily understand and trust each other.’ But also, ‘We were afraid the decision process might become more complex’. Sandy’s answer to ‘why a closed group?’ was the most explicit. She is someone with a deep spiritual life and practice, struggling with patriarchy in her religion and feeling acutely the ‘deep shame inherent in being a Jew today, and an American’.

It is only possible for me to do my political activism with women who engage one another personally, politically, spiritually. The fullness of our interaction, the ability to bring all of who we are to the group, makes the work possible in such hard times.

Type of actions

Bay Area Women in Black has never been into systematic vigils at repeated intervals in consistent venues. Rather, they’ve chosen mobility, spectacle and inventive symbolism. The event that marked their formation was an anti-Occupation Tashlich ceremony in 2001, initiated by Marcia. They were planning it when the attacks of September 11 occurred and performed it a week later during the Days of Awe that in the Jewish calendar precede Yom Kippur, a sacred time when Jews notice how they have ‘missed the mark’ in the past year. They made giant puppets, and both puppets and humans were dressed in black. They used a limited number of handsome placards, white lettering on black. The main message was ‘We refuse to be enemies’. It was designed as a family event. On the sea shore were women, children – men too. Although men are not included in the organizing and decision-making of BA WiB, their presence is welcome on marches and at such cultural events as this.

The speakers and performers were however all women. Ronnie Gilbert sang, cellos played, poems were read. Women spoke in turn on the religious commandments that Israel’s policies are breaking. Each took her tablet to one of the puppets. People took pieces of bread from baskets carried by the puppets, and cast it into the water of the Bay. It was deeply moving, enabling people to grieve openly about the condition of Israel and the fear and grief in this community after September 11 2001. What they had begun to do, Sandy said, was ‘invent a new liturgy’.

People are hungry for a place to be political using ritual form rather than words. To feel and express how tormenting, painful, complex, outraged, committed we are as Jews – while the Israeli government is doing what it is.

Two years later they repeated the Tashlich event, this time using huge cardboard partitions to create a semblance of the Israeli Separation Wall.

These were placed in and among the crowd, to evoke the affront of arbitrary separation. People were invited to rip pieces off the wall and to write on them messages of how Israel was 'missing the mark' regarding the Occupation. The puppets and their bread baskets made an appearance again. People exchanged bread for the pieces of cardboard on which they had written their messages.

Bay Area WiB has performed other such dramas – inside a progressive synagogue, and in San Francisco's busiest shopping district during the Thanksgiving sales. The group's consistent messages, learned from the Israeli feminist group Bat Shalom, are, Penny said, 'As women we will talk, we will not shoot'; 'Women may leave the negotiating table but we will come back to it'; and 'We sit on the same side of the table – the other side is the Occupation'. They actively raise funding, and are ready to spend money on making their actions look good. Their placards are collectively agreed and professionally produced. They use one-page flyers to engage discursively with the people around them.

The concept

Bay Area WiB is nothing if not conceptual. In a way, beneath the action, they're a study group. Not surprisingly they admire the Israeli organizations Bat Shalom and New Profile. Being highly articulate artists in different fields, 'it's in our group culture to think carefully about what we do' (Sandy). Each woman knows what she wants from her engagement. For Jane, for instance, it's

finding a voice for my extreme distress at the Occupation, this inhumane way of dealing with another people...this is an incredible space we've made in Women in Black, an organization in this country that has respect for the best of Jewish religion, which can hold my broken Israeli heart.

What Frances, as an artist and film maker, loves about the group is that it uses a mixture of political and cultural skills 'to put across a complex message, a nuanced message that's not often heard, beyond the mere rallying cry'. For Penny it's the international dimension WiB provides. 'I love it, the connection back to the Mothers of the Disappeared, the Women of the Black Sash, Northern Ireland, a worldwide movement of women speaking out against human rights abuses.' Sandy is proud to be a part of it because

The rituals for me are a way of honouring the spiritual and political dimensions of being a Jew. These shapes and forms that creative feminists conceptualise. A certain formality and discretion. Everything about my spiritual and political life that feels important is there.

Treading on broken glass: engaging with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict

I've dwelt on Bay Area WiB in some detail because it's dissimilar to a lot of other Women in Black groups, and because it illuminates the one particular

issue that dominates all others in the US WiB environment: Israel and Palestine. BA WiB, actually, do also undertake (to a lesser extent, and exerting some strain on the group) actions on other topics – and I return to this below. So, as we've seen, do San Francisco WiB. But it's true that the most visible expressions of all three groups are about Israel and Palestine.

The three groups, despite existing within a few miles of each other, are rather separate. It is not that there's animosity - they sometimes walk side by side on national demonstrations, and each will advertise the others' activities. Berkeley attended Bay Area WiB's Thanksgiving action, 'It was really neat!', they said. They were also planning to join San Francisco WiB for their vigil in December 2004. But day-to-day co-operation is lacking. Some members regret this, others are philosophical about it. The differences are partly stylistic – some women just prefer vigils, some prefer theatre; some like megaphones, some can't abide them; some like predictability, others like surprise. There was, too, it has to be said, some disappointment in the older groups when Bay Area WiB chose such a geographically encompassing name for itself, as if disregarding the older groups' existence. This distance between the groups could have been closed perhaps were it not for quite profound differences on what each is prepared to say publicly about Israel/Palestine. Referring to this, Jennifer Beach of San Francisco WiB said, 'the truth is we don't fight because we don't talk'. Later, she spelled this out as follows.

The distance between us is mostly political. We disagree on issues surrounding Israeli and US policy and we need to be able to articulate what our distinct politics actually are. If we tried to be unified, we could not, since those things which make us different are very important to us.

The context for this is the prevailing anti-semitism, not only in US society but also among a minority in the left and anti-war movements, who too readily engage in a hate discourse that elides Sharon with 'Israelis', and 'Israelis' with 'Jews'. Whether this is motivated or merely careless, the effect is the same. Fear of exacerbating anti-semitism makes some anti-Occupation Jews cautious about the kinds of public statements they themselves make. It makes them highly sensitive to the detail and language of non-Jews' campaigns against the Occupation. It silences some thoughtful Jews and non-Jews altogether.

Another aspect of the context is slippery meanings. It's non-Jews among the women activists, I found, who most readily used the terms Zionist and anti-Zionist, and this is only partly due to the wish among many of the Jews not to alienate those in the predominantly Zionist community they wish to persuade. It's also partly because different people would deem different demands as typifying Zionism, ditto anti-Zionism. For instance, Zionism could, but might not, be seen as compatible with the existence of a Palestinian state in the 'promised land' of Judaea and Samaria. Anti-Zionism could, but might not, be seen as compatible with the existence of an Israeli state of some/any kind. Some women call San Francisco and Berkeley WiBs (and some of them call themselves) anti-Zionist. Some women call Bay Area WiB (and some of them

might call themselves) Zionist. Others strongly reject using such labels. Given the slipperiness of meaning, using such dichotomous language is itself divisive.

It's more helpful to discern the precise issues at stake. Reading from their leaflets, and judging from our conversations, I can see several on which Berkeley WiB, for instance, might be willing to make clear statements (implying unanimity in the group), while Bay Area WiB, for their part, would find forms of expression that allowed for uncertainty and conflictual feelings in their group.

- One is the 'right of return' of displaced Palestinians to their former homes in Israel – on which the softening clause 'or reparations' will be variously deployed. Berkeley WiB state this clearly, but lost several members early on, who found themselves in disagreement. In Bay Area WiB there is a wide range of positions, but they 'navigate the issue pragmatically and succeed in getting most of the message out'.
- At stake in the right of return is the future existence of a specifically Jewish state. A linked issue therefore is the status of non-Jews in Israel. We saw that Berkeley WiB speak of 'apartheid' in making a demand for equal citizenship rights for Palestinians remaining in Israel from before 1948. Others would hesitate to use this terminology. They might prefer to speak of Israeli racism.
- A third contested matter: there is the demand to the US government to withhold aid from Israel. As we saw, Berkeley WiB phrases this 'an end to aid to Israel until violence against Palestinians stops, then aid must be shared equally with Palestinians'. But some Jews believe that to demand withdrawal of US support from Israel is, frankly, to condemn the Israeli state to oblivion.
- Finally, we might cite the use of the word 'Palestine' (as opposed to Palestinians) which suggests not just the legitimacy of negotiations over a future Palestinian state, but a present statehood denied. Thus Berkeley WiB say '*Palestine* is a taboo issue here. If we don't raise it, who will?'

It is of course possible for anti-Occupation Jews to both agree and disagree with these positions and expressions. As we saw, Berkeley WiB has Jewish members, and Jews predominate not only in Bay Area but also in San Francisco WiB. It is not a question of 'who' you are, but what your politics are. Equally, it is a question of whom you seek to persuade. SF and Berkeley WiB vigils do not primarily address the Jewish community. They therefore don't forfeit effectiveness by being seen as anti-Zionist (provided they are not seen as anti-semitic, which would greatly distress them). Bay Area WiB by contrast are clear that they want to appeal to the middle ground among Jews. 'We want to avoid antagonizing them, while at the same time not compromising'. They want to balance 'care for Israeli people' with 'end the Occupation'. In this they face very much the same problem as Women in Black in Israel, who

also, it should be remembered, because of the alienating potential of more specific demands, have often felt the need to limit their agenda to 'End the Occupation'.

The 'aid' issue is specially interesting. Sarah Anne Minkin (a former WiB activist, now a student at Berkeley) told me 'just talking about the question of 'stopping aid' at all you put yourself outside the Jewish community. It seems to threaten separation from the US, isolating Israel'. Bay Area WiB have gradually shifted ground on aid. Sandy said 'As things get worse, we get pushed to the left'. They still do not feel able to say 'no aid', nor even 'no military aid'. They do toy with the phrase 'suspend aid'. 'It's taken us two and a half years to get to oppose just the *amount* of military aid, and aid to the *settlements* specifically.' Finally, some of the group have become active on the issue – but in support of a rather precisely focused campaign by JVP against the export of Caterpillar bulldozers, used to demolish Palestinian houses and blockades.

There is a great deal of pain involved in these debates. Risks are taken with each others' feelings. San Francisco and Berkeley WiBs risk being seen as insensitive to Jewish trauma, flying dangerously close to the wind of anti-semitism; Bay Area WiB risks having its 'nuances' interpreted as compromising with Jewish existential neuroses. Terry Greenblatt, former director of Bat Shalom, the well-known Israeli women's peace project based in Jerusalem, is currently living in Berkeley. She told me that working in the Jewish community here, 'It's gut-wrenching and difficult, but important work. I'm meeting with women who on many other issues would stand proudly together. But on the Middle East issue they don't have the language to speak to each other.'

Then there's US militarism, the War on Terror and regime change at home...

There is, finally, among all this broken glass, shattered by the question 'what WiB should be saying on Israel/Palestine', another question that still remains to be answered. Should WiB, worldwide, which started in Israel in protest against the Occupation, continue to be focused only on this? In a decade and a half we've witnessed an exponential growth of the movement, not only to encompass a geographical range unimaginable to the women who stood in Jerusalem in 1988, but also to take on an unthinkably wide spectrum of wrongs, from violence against women and in the community, to wars of many different kinds, the arms trade, militarism as a system, and Western neo-imperialism as *causus belli*. Some WiB women are bemused and a bit dismayed by this proliferation. It's not the movement they intended. Focus has been lost, energies dissipated, they feel.

But others can't possibly see any valid distinction between the Israel issue, the Middle East issue and the whole shebang.⁴ Israeli policy in relation to

⁴ 'Any matter of current concern; thing; business. 1895.' US slang, origin unknown. Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

Palestinians, US policy in relation to Israel, and neo-imperialism worldwide, have provoked economic and social ills that in turn have fuelled Islamic fundamentalist violence and a counteracting 'war on terror', from which none of us is safe. As Terry put it

Some in Israeli WiB would have wanted WiB to remain Israel/Palestine-focused. We astoundingly do think ours is 'the' conflict. Only when you get outside the country do you see: Shit! There's all this! We're too narrow. [I asked: And is this reflected in US WiB?] Yes. But here it's schizophrenic. They simultaneously want connection to global issues.

Of the three WiBs, curiously, Berkeley WiB with the smallest proportion of Jews, has most consistently sustained a focus on Israel/Palestine. San Francisco WiB's placards and vigils give the impression that it has done so, but its leaflets range much wider: Yugoslavia, Iraq, Haiti, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Kurdistan, East Timor. And Bay Area WiB, self-defining as a group of Jewish feminists, has gradually felt obliged to extend its focus beyond Israel. They protested against the bombing of Afghanistan, and against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Later that year they participated in the global action against the murder of women in Juarez and Chihuahua in Mexico, with a sign reading 'no to violence against women, women's rights are human rights'. They held a vigil on the day of the national Million Women March on reproductive and other rights of women. But 'most of our original group felt such things were stretching WiB's focus', said Penny.

In this wider concern over US policy Women in Black are responsive to their environment. Of course they are closely interactive, through shared membership or shared actions, with Jewish allies such as the progressive Jewish Voice for Peace and the more moderate Brit Tzedek. They are aware of related groups, each with its unique take on the issue, such as Jews for a Free Palestine, or Students for Justice in Palestine. But they also participate in the broader mobilizations against the Bush administration's militarist adventures, including the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the War Resisters League, ANSWER and United for Peace and Justice, the coalition that brings them all out in national demonstrations.

But none of these *anti-war networks* vocalize a gender perspective. They do not articulate the sex-specific experiences of war, or recognize masculinities as being implicated in militarism and violence. As Jennifer said, 'It is very difficult for us to play the role we would like to in the broader anti-war movement. What makes our vigils work, in part, is that they are sustainable.'

On the other hand, the contemporary *women's movement* in the USA lacks a take on war. A significant component of it could be termed 'liberal', in the sense of women seeking equality with the men of a relatively prosperous class (and struggling to maintain a presence in the Democratic Party). A more radical component is focused on reproductive rights. The very successful

Million Women March, for instance, was organized by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL, or Pro-Choice America). But, Terry told me

The organizers made no connections with international issues. They lack a materialist analysis. They don't see the link between patriarchy, nationalism and militarism, the way the right wing and fundamentalists absolutely do see it.

The placards of the WiB women participating in the Million Women March therefore seemed to be voicing a minority concern.

Code Pink

I did however come across another network that is both gender-minded and war/militarism focused. It's Code Pink, a movement that's become something of a phenomenon in the USA and is starting to break out like a colourful rash in other countries. I met one of its founders, Medea Benjamin, in her home base, the San Francisco offices of the Global Exchange, an international human rights organization dedicated to promoting environmental, political and social justice.

In 2002, terribly distressed by the bombing of Afghanistan in the first phase of the US 'war on terror', Medea and other women visited that country and made contact with Afghan women. On return they held press conferences highlighting civilian casualties and the situation of Afghan women. They could gain little attention from the media. But Medea had come back from that trip feeling, she said,

a great need for a women's focus. There was so much aggressive male energy about. Bin Laden saying it's OK to kill thousands. Cowboy Bush killing thousands more in Afghanistan. Hussein's *mafiosi* in Iraq. I felt: a pox on all your houses.

The movement she, Diane Wilson, Julie Evans and others then started was inspired by a joke. The state security services were terrorising people in the name of anti-terrorism with their Code Red alerts, their Code Orange alerts. We could send up this system, they thought. Why not Code Shocking Pink? They decided to go to Washington DC in October 2002 and start some pink actions. At first there were just six of them, in the rain, at Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day. The Iraq war was looming. Their signs said 'support the vets, stop the war'. They only avoided being physically attacked because the Vets were (they admitted) disarmed by the flimsy pink gowns the women were wearing. Undeterred, a month later, the women sent out a call for a women's camp. The inspirational thought, Medea said, was

massive numbers like at Greenham Common. An ongoing encampment. We had a vision of pink tents all across Lafayette Park, opposite the White House, until George Bush agreed not to go to war. We imagined thousands of women dropping their lives to come and join us! It didn't happen.

Not even a hundred turned up. It was freezing cold. By nightfall there were only eight left. They weren't allowed to put up more than one tent, and at 5 am they were evicted from that, too. The next night they took tarps. The police dismantled them. Meanwhile, the women were attempting a hunger fast.

That was hard! We thought what the hell are we doing here? Thank God the police came on the third night and said 'out'. After that we decided to do our action just from sun-up to sundown. We kept it up for four months with a rotation of women. Even that took a lot of organising. It was terrible winter.

Other women's groups supported the camp. WILPF did a weekend, so did Washington DC WiB, and trade union women, even businesswomen. They achieved a lot of publicity. Reporters from all over the world came knowing they could be sure of recording a soundbite against the war. The women ended their action on International Women's Day March 8, 2003, with a thousand-strong march and rally, 'very positive and joyful'. Alice Walker was there, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Goodman. 'We worked hard to get arrested,' said Medea. But they did, and those few hours in jail were 'a great feeling'.

Code Pink's trade mark is a jokey campaign around the idea of the 'pink slip' and the 'pink badge of courage'. In the USA, when you are fired from a job your employer hands you a 'pink slip' – a notice of dismissal. So Code Pink give highly publicized 'pink slips' to delinquent Congress-persons. Except that in this case it wasn't a bureaucratic form but a sexy bit of pink underwear. Favoured personalities, by contrast, were decorated with a pink 'gong' of commendation. At times, however, external events precipitate more anger and distress among Code Pink women than can really be expressed by wafting pink silk around. When the invasion started they went in a screaming horde to Rumsfeld's house, some dressed as soldiers, covered with blood as if hit by a bomb. They took 'body parts' and a coffin. 'We even scared ourselves. But it was cathartic.'

As anticipated in the 2002 visit to Afghanistan, Code Pink combine their practice of chromatic and extrovert action with a practice of solidarity travel. This was a relatively thinkable step for them because Global Exchange had pioneered 'people to people ties' already for fifteen years. They went back to Afghanistan, accompanied by some of the families who lost members in the attack on the World Trade Centre. They've also made frequent visits to support women in Iraq, before and since the invasion. Here they've used music and dance, humour and street theatre ('blood for oil', 'smoking guns'). Before the invasion they had to struggle against co-optation by the regime. Since, they've had Coalition forces calling them 'Ba'athists'.

Code Pink as yet have little structure. 'We're afraid of it, the burden of it,' Medea says. Organization is limited to 'who'll do what and when'. Funding is opportunistic. For solidarity travel, the women involved each raise enough to cover their own travel costs. The core group of eight communicates mainly by

telephone conference calls between Los Angeles, Washington, New York and San Francisco. They do a weekly alert to their ever-growing e-list of 30,000 addresses and depend on their website (www.codepinkalert.org) as a first line of information. But with more and more Code Pink groups springing up in the USA (120 at the last count) and in other countries, all asking for guidance, they're aware that more analysis and clarity are going to be needed.

They would be sad, though, if this were to be gained at the cost of spontaneity. There's something refreshing, just now, about the way Code Pink can startle and surprise, by its wide range of topics and inventive methodologies. Women have for instance picketed a pharmacy to 'free the condoms' (get them out from under that glass case!). They have joined the Million Women March with signs saying 'out of our bodies, out of Iraq'. And they have delivered protests against war not only to the administration but also to the capitalist corporations, whom they see as war's ultimate winners.⁵

Things these visits made me think about

I'm making a practice of ending these 'profiles' with an addendum about the matters that are left rattling round in my head when I get home. In this case there were four things I felt somehow unresolved for me after my immersion in this inspiring set of relations, ideas and practices.

The 'how to get gender into the picture?' question

As I've found elsewhere, it's relatively easy to organize and act 'as women' but less easy to make a gender analysis explicit in everything you do. Code Pink for instance allow the gender symbolism of pink to speak for them when they picket Donald Rumsfeld, and do not necessarily say 'your policies are lousy for women in this, this and this way'. The more analytical and wordy

⁵ Other women's initiatives against militarism and war, some national, some regional, that were mentioned during my conversations in the Bay Area, include:

- (1) *Global Women's Strike* (Selma James etc.). It has a presence in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, and is active on anti-war among other issues.
- (2) WILPF, the *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, while active elsewhere in the USA, is (I was told) not very visible on the West Coast.
- (3) WAND, *Women's Actions for New Directions*, is a longstanding group originally protesting against nuclear weapons. It is visible here, but 'not very radical'.
- (4) *Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow*, comprising relatives and survivors of 9/11, are respected for their work opposing US military responses to the attack.
- (5) *Gatherthewomen.org* is a web-based motivator for March 8 actions worldwide.
- (6) *Baring Witness*, women of Marin County who first created the naked peace signs etc., have a website designed to spread this form of action.
- (7) *Women for Peace*, a group local to East Bay, have a newsletter.
- (8) *Mourning Mothers*, San Francisco, deploy huge female puppets with ragged babies in their arms.
- (9) *Raging Grannies*, Seattle, sing peace songs in which their own words are set to popular tunes.
- (10) Various organizations of women of colour in this area address, not war, but violence and social injustice.
- (11) The East Asia, US, Puerto Rico Women against Militarism Network links women around the Pacific in locations where the US military are based – see separate Profile to follow.

your group, the more explicit you can be. There's a special difficulty when you need to be speedy and succinct, as in those props you take on the street: banners, placards, flyers. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable, when conflicts threaten entire communities, to introduce 'special pleading' for women. Thus, Berkeley WiB don't stress gender much in their public discourse. And Jennifer of SF WiB explained their feelings in terms we in London WiB would well understand.

We used to have placards that started 'Women say...' Just now our aesthetic is to use as few words as possible. It's not that we can't handle being explicit. It's just felt it wouldn't be very meaningful to passers-by. US culture is about short sound-bites. People just scan us to get a sense of what we're saying. Minimal eye-contact time! War: are you for it or against it?

In their flyers, nonetheless, where they can afford to be a little more wordy, SF WiB do juxtapose on a single page 'stop the invasion of Iraq' with 'defend abortion rights', 'restore welfare', 'cut prison and military spending, support schools and healthcare', 'stop violence against women' and 'stop sex trafficking'. They simply let the connection speak for itself.

That Bay Area WiB want to deal with gender in relation to Israel/Palestine 'is a given – we are a group of Jewish feminists and allies'. Marcia said, in fact 'the situation exists precisely because women have been silenced in both societies'. Their co-operation with women's networks in Israel and Palestine speak for this woman-focus, and their actions (the puppets for instance) are clearly feminine. Some of their key signs say 'Mothers are mourning...' They also use surrogates, such as 'education and health', to stand for a feminine interest. But actually introducing gender issues more conceptually into placards and flyers is not so easy. To put women in the centre, said Sandy, feels as if 'it would need a whole lot of re-education'.

It's a dual-dual nuancing we have to do – Israel/Palestine, men/women. Just holding the dual reality of the Israel/Palestine message is already too complex. It's hard enough to get across "They don't want to push us into the sea". To get people to hear even *that* is almost impossible! I don't know how you get gender into it too. You'd need a semester of seminars!

And all of this is to speak of gender as though it were only about 'women'. To introduce on placards and in leaflets the problematic of men and masculinity, and their relationship to nationalism and militarism, is harder still.

The practice of transversal politics

As anti-war activists we operate in communities characterized by diversity, exclusions, inequalities and violence, and in our international relationships we operate in a world characterized by these same things. I haven't met any women activists to whom it's not common sense that bridge-building is foundational to anti-war action. Practising it isn't so easy.

In the nation-wide anti-war movement in the USA people of colour (I was widely told) are not present in proportion to their numbers in the population. This is also the case in the Women in Black groups I met. Mind you, this term, 'of colour' more commonly used in the USA than in Britain, calls for more elaboration. Afro-Americans are under-represented in the movement. But so also are Latin-Americans, Asian-Americans and (specially significant in the present instant) Arab and/or Muslim Americans.

More important, perhaps, is the question: is there a clear anti-racist politics in the movement? In the mixed sex movement against war, antiracism, and the building of conscious alliances with minority groups, is variably manifested. (Certainly it is more evident than an anti-sexist, gender-sensitive politics and politically-aware alliances with feminist groups.)

I wondered, how much is antiracism explicit in our women's initiatives? There were no African, Asian or Arab Americans in the core groups of the three WiBs, so far as I know. Each group was aware of a lack of diversity in this respect. But, as Jennifer Beach helpfully pointed out

It's a mistake to assume that it's an appropriate goal for WiB to seek to be more racially inclusive. For us to put forward that goal is for us to say that our politics are not sound on their own and that we are not valid without a representational presence. Given the profound racism and material inequities of the United States, it would be strange for us to assume that this form and articulation [of ours] can have the same priority for women across cultural and ethnic lines.... Our local WiB relationships with various communities, notably the Arabic community which is vital in the Bay Area, requires examination, criticism and development – but [we should not evaluate ourselves] by whether or not there are Arab women at our vigils. To expect that would be naïve and inappropriate...

And she added

All of this is not to say that we should not work with women from various communities to develop a comprehensive and international anti-racist and anti-colonial politic which should define our programme and our approach.

And this is a theme that concerns us a lot in our London WiB group. Around us are many politically aware and (in some cases) organized women from Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Sudan etc. We ask ourselves: how much do we really talk with them, look to them to help develop our understanding of current events, and reflect their agendas (e.g. immigration rights?) in our vigils?

Here on the West Coast, SF WiB were modelling this bridge-building in their interesting involvement with local Filipinas, *Gabriela* in particular, and occasional individual friendships. However, I didn't find any developed co-operation of this kind with local Iraqi, Afghan, Palestinian etc. women or

women's organizations. It could be that they don't exist, or that their political positions (for instance on violence) are felt to make them inappropriate as partners.

A further bridging process practised by many WiB groups is to travel to, from and between war-affected areas to learn from and support women affected by violence. And here there was a more evident practice. Vivian of Berkeley WiB had travelled to Palestine in a Christian ecumenical context, addressing the vexatious issue of Christian Zionism.⁶ Several of the women of Bay Area WiB travel frequently to Israel. Penny, in her multiple roles working with the Middle East Children's Alliance, Jewish Voice for Peace and Bay Area WiB, has often been to the Occupied Territories, including participating in the International Solidarity Movement. Creative political links to Palestinian women however are difficult to achieve and sustain, because many Palestinian women activists are absorbed with Palestinian liberation work.

Code Pink I found was doing more external bridge-building than the Women in Black groups. As we saw, they had sent groups repeatedly to Afghanistan, and to Iraq, where they've set up an Occupation Watch Centre and have built relationships with Kurdish women, university women, communist women and women detainees.

There are realistic constraints to overseas bridge-building, among them political considerations, communication and money – it depends on women having access either to personal resources or grant funding. But this kind of connectedness is clearly something the women activists wished for. When they got it, they gained a lot from it. Jennifer said of their travel to the Philippines

Visits like this have an immeasurable effect. Activists need to travel. Maybe like artists they need inspiration. It's fantastic to meet feminists who are opposing US dominance out there in the world. It's important to understand the roots – how US imperialism has specific effects on women. To see that there's no safe zone...it impacts on all of us.

Reaching the politicians: 'filtering up' versus 'blood on the sofa'

WiB groups, not only here on the West Coast of the USA but in other countries, are taxed by the problem of how, starting from a locality, you can effect large-scale political change. Most hold onto a belief in an upward and outward filtering of opinion. Influencing the thought and action of people on the street, one by one, they hope to feed into larger movements, generating a widespread rejection of state policy and military authority.

⁶ Christian Zionists support Jewish fundamentalist Zionist claims because they believe Jewish control of the holy places, and of all Eretz Israel, to be a predestined stage in their prophesied restoration to Christianity at the Second Coming. The next stage of this, however, requires the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, or else...

One mechanism is obviously to change voting patterns. Interestingly, in 2004 Bay Area WiB chose to try and do this more directly. At a mid-year 'retreat' the group came up with the thought that what had to matter most just then for any group concerned with war-and-peace in the USA was 'regime change at home'. In the run-up to the Presidential election they gave themselves over to a project of voter registration. They identified single women as a potentially anti-Bush segment of the population. They used a 5-min film made by Frances, designed to get out the votes of the 22 million unregistered women country-wide. At election time in November they door-stepped and car-pooled them into the voting booths. Sandy said, ruefully 'For the first time in my life I'm doing electoral politics – what melancholy pragmatism!'

Lobbying your Congress-person is not a favoured approach among the majority of women I met. For one useful attempt, I heard of several that had felt like misplaced energy. Code Pink, as we saw, had taken the direct action route to the White House fence and, when that failed, adopted a strategy of getting blood onto the administration's sofas and decorating their offices with pink ribbon. Code Pink also do shareholder interventions, gaining access to the meetings of corporations – for instance, to expose the scandal of US contracts in Iraq.

Finally, WiB communications

From my standpoint within the WiB 'communications development group' I'm always checking to see just how WiB women communicate with each other and what they might aspire to in this respect. I found among these three WiB groups a marked preference for the well-thumbed phone book and face to face meetings (the latter accounts for why it's so difficult to keep vigils silent – there's business to be done).

As I've found elsewhere, each group tends to depend on one woman to write for the group, and filter to them information coming from a wider WiB and a wider world. This woman is often one who's more at ease than others with the computer and the Web, though sometimes it's just a matter of time and talent. Jane tends to do the job for Berkeley WiB, Judith (Mirkinson) for SF WiB and Sandy for BA WiB. Thus other members will say in answer to my questions, 'Ask so-and-so – she's the one who's in touch'.

It may be that these key women are members of the e-lists that aspire to be US-wide (<wibcaucus>) or international - the 'official' English-language WiB list maintained by Yolanda in Spain, and the informal mailings of Lieve Snellings in Belgium, and other such women who push information out to large lists of addresses they have assembled over time. But much depends on an individual having time in a busy life to be systematic in channelling information, and I was left with the impression that connectedness is haphazard.

More significantly, there is ambivalence about how WiB communications should develop. There are three fears about being more intensively and

widely connected with other WiBs. One is of being drowned in information. In particular, when groups move from a simple 'address list mail-out' approach to a subscriber-based, interactive kind of list, inexperienced users often flood the mail with one-to-one chat, exasperating the remainder and causing some to unsubscribe. A second fear is of becoming too structured. In this respect even the idea of our 'international encounters' worried one woman in Berkeley WiB. 'Does this mean there's a hierarchy? Anarchy works well for us. It's what keeps us going!' The third is that if we learn too much about each other we shall see how much we differ. For instance, when I spoke of disagreements that had riven some WiBs in the USA in the past there was dismay: so we don't all agree?

But set against these worries, most women love the idea of being part of a global network of women called Women in Black, with whom they know they agree on a lot of important things concerning both the content and the style of activism 'for justice, against war' (as our international logo puts it). They value the idea that we may be gaining more capacity for coordinated worldwide actions.

Contacts

This profile is based on a one-week visit to the San Francisco Bay Area during which I was able to have individual or group interviews with the women listed below. The draft of this 'profile' was sent to everyone I interviewed, seeking their comments and amendments. An amended version was returned to them once more to assure that they would feel comfortable to have the finished profile put up on the WiB international website.

In Berkeley Women in Black: Jane Welford was my main correspondent and I had a group interview with her and other members of the group including: Hilda, Jane, Juanita, Marcella, Marina, Mary and Vivian. Group contact address: wibberkeley@yahoo.com

In San Francisco Women in Black: Jennifer Beach was my correspondent and only direct contact. Group contact address: ferbeach@yahoo.com

In Bay Area Women in Black: Penny Rosenwasser was my initial correspondent and I also interviewed Jane Area, Sandy Butler and Frances Reid. Group contact address: sandbutler@earthlink.net

I also had interviews with: Marcia Freedman; Sarah Anne Minkin; and Terry Greenblatt. Thank you all very, very much for welcoming me and sharing your thoughts.

This document is one of a series of local and regional profiles that will appear on this website in coming months. They are interim products a two-year research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the*

International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism, being carried out by the author from her base in the Department of Sociology, City University, London, during 2004/5, with the support of several charitable trusts. The profile is not intended for publication in its present form. I would be grateful if you would not quote it in published work without first seeking my agreement.

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