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A Profile of Women in Black in Belgium

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There is something of a preference among women of Women in Black internationally not to see WiB groups 'sorted and specified' by nation state. This makes particularly good sense in the case of Belgium, which is a country split in two by language, where parallel cultures exist side by side. The northern part is Flanders, where they speak Dutch, locally termed Flemish. The southern part is Wallonia, adjacent to France, and here they speak French. In Brussels, French is dominant but many Flemish-speakers also live there.

The European Commission has its offices in Brussels, making it a focus of Europe-wide political activity. Belgium is a member of NATO, and the headquarters of this organization are also in Brussels. The US Air Force have a presence in Belgium, including a base at Florennes. However, the present Belgian government is centre-left, a coalition of socialist and liberal parties, and they refused to join the US coalition in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They were thus not the object of oppositional demonstrations in the run-up to war.

So what is WiB in the territory known as Belgium? I found it to consist of several loosely attached elements. Without intending priority for any one of the groups or activities, following a brief little historical background immediately below, I start with *Vrouwen in 'T Zwart* in Leuven and allow the stories of other groups and individuals to flow from theirs.

Early developments in women's antiwar activism in Belgium

It was around 1980, prompted by the stationing of US cruise missiles in Europe, that a women's peace movement began to grow as a specific strand within second wave feminism in Belgium. In the French-speaking community, many of the women who would later join antiwar activity knew each other through involvement in the Women's House and the Université des Femmes in Brussels during the 1970s. In the Flemish-speaking area at this time there were two streams of feminist activism –one around women's shelters and the other around a Women's House.

Although the feminist activists of Flemish and French-speaking communities had separate and specific histories, they also often worked together. The movement for reproductive choice, instances of rape, and certain court cases provoked feminist mobilization, countrywide. The women's involvement in projects opposing violence against women predisposed them to see militarism also as a manifestation of masculine violence. Belgian women visited and supported Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the UK. Another very important moment for anti-militarism actions here was the Women's Pentagon Action, which directly inspired a protest action against the visit of the Pope to Belgium.

In 1985 when it became known that US nuclear missiles were to be sited in Florennes, the women joined with other (mixed sex) peace groups to buy a nearby house as a base for actions, making over the top floor for women. There were by now numerous local women's groups opposing weapons and hastening the end of the Cold War. A big conference was organized on the theme 'women and peace'.

The 1990s would bring a new kind of war threat – starting with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf War of 1991. 'At this moment,' Lieve Snellings told me, 'we thought it was time to work together as "women against war", and this is how we started a movement that in the French-speaking areas was called *Collectif Action Femmes* and in the Flemish areas *Vrouwen Aktie Kollektief: CAF-VAK*'. But language differences did not mean the two parts of the movement were totally segregated. Some women, such as Leen Vandamme and Annie Segers, were active in both CAF and VAK and would continue to sustain links between Women in Black groups in the two regions (see below). There was co-operation over major demonstrations in Brussels. Lieve Snellings, Edith Rubinstein and Fotoula Ioannidis, among others, were active in translating 'calls for action' and other materials between the two languages and into English.

The following year the former Yugoslavia began its descent into separatism and war. An aid convoy to Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina was organized by women of both language communities. Later, there would be contacts and separate visits by both groups to Women in Black (*Zene u Crnom*) in Belgrade, among whom strong friendships were formed. Beginning to 'feel like WiB', the Belgian women now organized actions back home under that name. They specially respected WiB Belgrade's practice of maintaining strong links with women of Bosnian Muslim, Croatian and Kosovan Albanian identity that Serb politicians designated 'the enemy'. So multiculturalism and connectedness were, from the start, important to WiB in Belgium. 'The most important thing for us is to lend solidarity to the women in war areas,' Ria Convents told me. 'We send photos of our actions to let them know we're doing it. Bridge-building is what's important to us.'

The Leuven Women in Black vigil group: *Vrouwen in 'T Zwart*

Currently, every Wednesday lunchtime, near the entrance to the City Hall of Leuven, an important university city in the Flemish-speaking area, you can see a group, usually of six women (maximum would be ten). They are standing in a *stille wake* – which means a vigil in silence, wearing black. This Leuven vigil, which includes Lieve and Ria, already mentioned above, is a close friendship group. Some of them, sharing the history I've described, have known each other for thirty years. After their half-hour demonstration, they will take their lunch-break together and then disperse back to work. Some are social workers, one is a lawyer, one works the night shift in a hospital casualty department.

This small vigil is rather consistent, in size, in composition and in their chosen action. They stood in this way for several years in the 1990s, but more recently have kept up the vigil continuously since November 2002. They hold two banners, written in Flemish. One says 'Women in Black, in anger and sorrow, against violence and war'. Others, added more recently, read 'In Solidarity with Palestinian AND Israeli Women', and 'It is very simple Mr.Sharon. Just end the Occupation'. They leaflet the passers-by with a specific message for the times, but they do so sparingly 'because photocopying is costly'. They do not hold meetings, aside from their shared lunch, a moment which has to serve both for friendship and planning. Some of them miss the deep political discussions of the 1980s – but time is simply lacking.

Although there are various 'women's' activities in Leuven, *Vrouwen in 'T Zwart* are the only feminist group of any kind in the town. There is mixed-sex, left anti-war activism in the Flemish-speaking area, with which they co-operate. There is however not much enthusiasm in the anti-war left for women-only activity. So Leuven WiB do feel deeply committed to their modest, regular action. They get satisfaction in being there, every Wednesday, come rain or shine.

There is also, as I found out, other kinds of work going on in the background to the WiB vigil, on other days of the week. I interviewed Ria and Lieve, both in the core group. The majority of *Vrouwen in 'T Zwart* are lesbians, specifically lesbian feminists. This is crucially important to the politics of the group. In one of their papers they write

Peace is only there when everybody has basic human rights, when there is no racism, homophobia, child and woman-molesting, or rape...war is an extreme enlargement of violence against children, women, people who are "different". (From 'What I can tell about the history of Women in Black Belgium - in fact Flemish part of the country', by Lieve Snellings, an article intended for a website. Undated.)

Lieve and Ria were among the earliest lesbians to come out publicly in Belgium, in the 1980s. Ria, who came out in the course of a TV programme, says, 'It was a struggle for lesbians in those days. We started in feminism and that made lesbianism possible for us... Most of us were middle and upper working-class women and we'd got an education, we weren't under-privileged. So it was lesbianism that gave me the first experience of being an outcast, a minority that wasn't accepted. This was my connection to oppressed people. I could say: "I know that!"'

As Ria stressed, above, one important on-going activity in the Leuven group is *solidarity work*, maintaining connections with women in areas subject to war. Ria says 'I work through friendship. I like concrete solidarity.' It's important to her that the significance of their small vigil is amplified by being one of maybe a couple of hundred WiB vigils in the world. Recently two members of the vigil visited Palestine and Israel. Specifically, though, they continue to maintain strong links with WiB in the former Yugoslavia (some of whom are likewise

politically-expressive lesbians). In 1996, on return from such a visit, the Leuven group made a theatre project, a play about women's lives in Bosnia.

A second important activity is *e-connection*. Lieve is an ace communicator, running numerous e-lists. One of the Flemish lists she moderates is for women anti-war activists in Belgium and Holland; one of the English lists is a kind of 'WiB international' list, serving as an important supplementary resource to the 'agreed' list moderated for international WiB by Yolanda Rouiller in Spain. Lieve is also a photographer and e-circulates many beautiful images that have a linking function between women around the world. 'When war is going on, it's something I can do,' she says.

The Women in Black Collective (*Collectif Femmes en Noir*), Brussels

The *Collectif Femmes en Noir contre les Centres Fermés et les Expulsions* (CFEN - protest group Women in Black against Closed Detention Centres and Expulsions) has a very different focus from that of the Leuven group. In fact they sometimes wonder whether the name 'Women in Black' is appropriate for what they do, which is to campaign around issues arising from immigration policy, fighting this political line of conduct and lending support to individual women asylum seekers. Several members had been involved in WiB demonstrations in support of the women of the former Yugoslavia, and they saw a continuity between that activism and their new project. Both were, after all, about the principles of peace and justice, the practice of solidarity with women affected by war and violence, and a critique of their government's policy.

CFEN is a group of six to eight women, all French-speaking, living in Brussels, connected by an e-mail listserv. They have no website. They fund their activities by a small monthly levy from each individual member. Before 1998 several had been members of a Collective of men and women protesting against the detention centres in which asylum seekers were confined 'as if they were criminals, though they have done nothing wrong'. There were some high profile cases of expulsion. In one instance a Nigerian woman, Semira Adamu, who had fled to Belgium and claimed asylum because she had been forced into an oppressive marriage in Nigeria, died by suffocation due to the violence of the security officers in their sixth attempt to expel her from the country. In the ensuing political scandal all protest groups expressed their indignation. But, as Fanny Filosof, an older feminist member of the group explained to me, the gender aspect, which was specifically the reason why Semira Adamu requested asylum in the first place, was seldom brought up, even in the media. We were saying:

These are acts that are specifically linked to gender. These are things that could only have happened to a woman. Sexual abuse, domestic violence, honour killings, forced marriage, excision, death by stoning and ... are violent deeds which only affect women. We demand that these violent acts constitute valid criteria for granting asylum and be taken into consideration in the Geneva Convention.

They therefore formed their own women's group in 1998, calling it *Collectif Femmes en Noir contre les Centres Fermés et les Expulsions*. They got in touch with the women in the detention centres, sent them phone cards, tried to obtain help for them. As for the women living outside these detention centres, some awaiting papers, some living clandestinely, they assist them when dealing with their lawyers in order to obtain asylum rights or 'regularization' and means of living. They talk to female politicians and to NGO's (non-governmental organizations) in search of support for them. They help them - whenever possible - to find a place to stay. They encourage women to speak out about their experiences, including sexual abuse, when making a case for asylum.

Although CFEN is purely feminist, they join forces with all protest groups struggling against immigration policies in Belgium: press conferences, demonstrations in front of closed detention centres and the Office des Etrangers (the office concerned with foreign citizens in Belgium), making travellers aware of this issue in airports when asylum seekers are being expelled. Fanny says:

A woman may be a victim in her country. But when she takes the step of leaving and coming here, she becomes a resister, and she should be respected as such. These women are stronger than I am. I learn from each one.

Florence X is a younger member of the group, who came to feminism after the experience of a Trotskyist group. She finds this work important, challenging, 'very very difficult, so emotional'. Her Marxist analysis makes her acutely aware of the causes of refugee movements, including war. She knows about, but has not personally met, the *Vrouwen in 'T Zwart* in the Flemish-speaking area. She values the existence of Women in Black worldwide, with its focus on opposition to war. 'I'm glad to feel linked to them. I want both things. But I prefer our work which is practical, and somewhat discreet.' She sees CFEN as emphatically feminist. 'For me, if you're in FEN, you're feminist. It means recognizing male oppression and women's subordination. There's a history and a present of women that's different from men's. As a feminist you have to ask the feminist question, wherever you are, whoever you're up against. And being part of a collective, being active, that's a necessary condition of being feminist.'

The group uses a consciously feminist approach. They attach great value to creating a responsible work group, without hierarchy, with a consciousness of power, deciding things and learning together. They claim their action to be purely political and to be devoid of 'humanitarianism' - although they feel very close to women on a human level. They stress the 'universality of patriarchy' and hence assert equality between themselves and asylum-seeking women. They describe themselves as 'a collective of women with and without papers. Some women join our activities, others leave, then come back: we are a collective in movement.' They passionately oppose the 'chilly, egoistic and restrictive asylum policies' of Belgium and of Europe and are

revolted by a rich Europe that imprisons, expels, and regulates people in a miserly way, creating a host of clandestine women and men, prey to exploiters and other traffickers, while poor countries, adjacent to war zones, take in hundreds of thousands of refugees (from the booklet *Femmes en Migration: Femmes en Noir Contre les Centres Fermes et Contre les Expulsions*. Page 11. My translation.)

Migrant women, say CFEN, have something to tell us about our own society as well as about theirs.

Other Women in Black activity in Brussels

CFEN, then, has a rather particular focus. But there are also other French-speaking women in Brussels who identify as *Femmes en Noir*, while varying in the extent to which this is a key factor in their lives. Although they do not have regular meetings or constitute 'a group', they, too derive from CAF/VAK and thus have a long history of activism. They are particularly important in the sense that when they organize, or share in organizing, demonstrations these take place in the capital city, Brussels, seat of the European Union and NATO, where they have high visibility and can directly challenge these and other international institutions. It's also important that they are there to link up with the many women who come to international women's movement events drawn to Brussels by the international and European institutions housed there.

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Edith Rubinstein and Marie-Françoise Ebel-Stewart, French-speakers of Brussels, like some of the Flemish-speakers, travelled to meet Women in Black in Belgrade. They were, as one of their leaflets put it, 'seduced by their intelligence and their philosophy'. (My translation.) On return, they urged the formation of a 'Women in Black' group in order to work for international recognition for the brave stance of WiB Belgrade, and to protect them against reprisals by the Milosevic regime. The emergent French-speaking and Brussels-based WiB group embraced the three principles modelled by WiB Belgrade: pacifism, feminism and anti-racist multiculturalism – a refusal to 'dehumanize the enemy', a wish to allow differences of identity and belief to co-exist. Along with Leuven WiB, the Brussels WiB, sponsored women from the former Yugoslavia and Israel/Palestine to attend and speak at demonstrations in Brussels. For periods of time they would be holding weekly vigils, a practice (as they put it) of 'visible silence'.

Since 11 September 2001 the focus of activism in Brussels has shifted to the actions of the USA and its allies in the 'war on terror', the intensifying Israel/Palestine conflict and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. When WiB or other women's actions on these themes have been organized in Brussels they have characteristically been effected by a loose partnership of Brussels feminist antimilitarists, drawing on the organizational resources of the Women's House (Association 29 rue Blanche, "Mouvement des Femmes"). Some of the key women involved in this informal network are Fotoula Ioannidis, Marie-Françoise Stewart-Ebel and Edith Rubinstein. Fotoula is the 'animatrice' of the Women's House. Marie-Françoise is administrator of an innovatory feminist

project that trains women in new technologies, is very active in CFEN and has a long history in feminism in Brussels.

For Edith Rubinstein, WiB is a primary identity, and in turn she is important for WiB as an international network because she is not only an active member of the WiB international communications listserv but also the moderator of a French-language WiB listserv, she herself doing much of the translation of international material into French. She and Lieve are on each other's e-lists and convey information to and fro.

Edith tends to act as an individual, linked by friendship to other active women, but free to take her own initiatives, write her own leaflets and placards. She says

I do not believe in unanimity. We are all individuals. I only regret that no more people take initiatives on their own. I like the device: "do it!". I take individual initiatives but directed towards the community. My motto is more or less 'Think individually (for the collective) and act collectively'.

So as to be clear, rather than speaking as 'we' in the plural, she always signs herself 'a' (singular) WiB, respecting the fact that others were not consulted although 'I feel they will not disapprove what I write and it is almost always the case'. In strong contrast to the group ethic of CFEN, she sees such scope for individual action as characteristic of WiB, and as one of its strengths.

Edith, like Fanny Filosof, is around 70 years of age, and shares with her thirty years of feminist experience dating back to the Women's House and the Université des Femmes (see above). As a long-time passionate left internationalist feminist, anti-capitalist, *alter-mondialiste* and eco-feminist, a deep believer in 'justice' and 'ethics', Edith gives these colourings to all she does as WiB. Her beliefs are visible in the leaflets, press statements and placards she continually authors. 'That's me,' she says.

Motherhood is fundamental to women's 'difference', Edith believes. She bases this belief on observation: women act first as mothers, and this gives them a tendency to pacifism. She thus dislikes hearing such a view stigmatised as 'essentialism'. She explains

Women *logically* (not naturally) become pacifists because they do not want their children, their sons, killed in a war...they do not want their sons to kill other mothers' sons. Just as you can be against prostitution as a feminist or a puritan, so you can value motherhood as a feminist antimilitarist or a nationalist. I'm glad women are altruistic, even if it's patriarchy that made us so. Men are not altruistic enough.

Edith tends to pessimism about the future and this leads her to a 'minimalist thought' about activism: 'I don't know if what I'm doing helps. But I'm sure that if I do nothing it certainly *will not* help.' Plus, she says, 'Doing something makes you feel better!'

A WiB group in Liège.

There were at certain times, WiB vigils occurring in four or five cities in Belgium, in addition to Leuven and Brussels, but these appeared, at the time of my visit in January 2004, to have become inactive. A few weeks later however I was suddenly alerted to a new website, that of *Femmes en Noir* in Liège, a town in the French-speaking south-east of the country. The website indicates a classic WiB model of silent, non-violent vigils combined with solidarity work and bridge-building. They are strongly focused on an end to the Israeli Occupation of Palestine, and opposition to the war against Iraq. They specifically oppose rape, and also call for justice for the Rwandan people. The correspondent for this group is Dominique Dauby.

Things this visit to Belgium made me think about:

The problem of language. Few French-speaking Belgians speak Flemish, and Flemish-speakers vary greatly in how well they speak French. Women who are fluent in both languages play a specially important part in giving country-wide coherence to women's anti-war organizing. In addition, international connectedness in WiB, generally, is easier if you are fluent in English. A reminder of this difficulty came from Fanny, who explained that she 'leaves international links to Marie-Françoise', by saying 'my English isn't that good'.

The importance of lesbianism. I saw clearly in Leuven how feminist lesbian identification can make for particularly strong friendship links, adds a special kind of energy to action and organization, and also makes for clarity about the connection between different kinds of marginalization and oppression, and between different expressions of violence. Marie-Françoise emphasized how important for her the role of lesbians in WiB Belgrade had been, 'enriching my theory and practice, I suppose, in the same way I'd seen some women being inspired by Marxism'.

Violence as indivisible. There was a clear expression here of the intrinsic connection between violence against women and the violence of war, especially in the work of CFEN. Fanny for instance says, 'The basis is feminism. We can't be just against war, we must oppose all violence. Against women, against children. Violence isn't only bombs.'

How internationalism changes us. It is the connections women have made outwards from Belgium to activists in other countries that many women say have motivated them most. Thus Marie-Françoise and Edith 'internationalized' their own political consciousness during ten years' activism in the European Forum of Socialist (later 'Left') Feminists (of which Lieve was also a member). The mould-breaking mass WiB action during the UN Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 is remembered by those who were there as an inspiring moment. The partnership with WiB Belgrade, and connection with Israeli/Palestinian women, has been formative for WiB women in both parts of Belgium.

The co-existence of different feminisms. Ria Convents, in Leuven, told me, 'For me there is a basic difference between women and men', something she saw as hinging on child bearing. And, as we saw, Edith Rubinstein combines with an unshakeable left/socialist feminism an even more explicit belief in women's orientation to pacifism, again deriving specifically from motherhood. The philosophies many see as constituting different and contrary feminisms can, it seems, be lived and experienced by any one individual as non-conflictual. Edith made the general comment that there are two kinds of feminism in Belgium, a Flemish one, close to those of the anglo-saxon countries and northern Europe, and a French one, closer to the rather distinctive feminism of France – but I had no chance to check out this perception with other women.

Acceptance of different foci and processes under the name of Women in Black. *Vrouwen in T'Zwart* and CFEN address distinctly different topics and work in distinctive ways, one a street vigil opposing war, the other a working group supporting asylum seekers. But both are membership groups with a high degree of coherence in comparison with the fragmented, but nonetheless important, activity of Edith, Fotoula and other French-speaking WiBs in Brussels. There is a thus high degree of tolerance among the activist women of different approaches to 'doing WiB'. Ria says 'I don't have the only truth!'

Individual initiative versus group belonging. Edith wrote to me 'WiBs are individuals who choose in all independence if they join a group or not'. Florence by contrast, reflecting on CFEN, said 'Being part of a collective... that's essential in being a feminist.' Both beliefs and both practices clearly exist within WiB Brussels. I wonder if this is characteristic of WiB in other countries and regions?

Contacts

This profile is based on a three-day visit to 'Belgium' as part of the fieldwork for my current research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*. During the visit I had interviews with Fanny Filosof, Florence X, Edith Rubinstein, Ria Convents and Lieve Snellings, some intermittent conversations with Marie-Françoise Stewart-Ebel and a brief encounter with Fotoula Ioannidis. Thanks to you all!

I returned a first draft of this Profile to everyone I had interviewed, and from many of them I received helpful comments and amendments, which I took account of in producing a second draft. This second draft was returned to everyone to see whether they would feel comfortable to have the profile put up on the WiB international website. It is now with their agreement that I go public with it. We hope it will interest WiB and other active women in other countries. 'Watch this space' for forthcoming profiles from Turkey, the USA and.....

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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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