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WOMEN IN BLACK, GULF COAST, FLORIDA: Letting Silence Speak

Cynthia Cockburn

Origins and composition of the group

The stimulus that brought Gulf Coast WiB into existence was September 11. What they found in common at that moment was the urgent wish to say 'our grief is not a cry for war'.

Julia Aires circulated around her friendship network the news that Ronnie Gilbert, a well known singer and member of Women in Black in San Francisco, had been targeted by the FBI for post-September 11 activism. Some women got together thinking, 'the way to stop such harassment is to increase our numbers, to become so big they can't pick us off one by one'. They knew of the work of WiB in Israel and Yugoslavia. Julia put out a call to form a WiB group in and around St.Petersburg.

The call got a response. Jackie Mirkin said of herself and partner Edie Daly

After September 11 we sat glued to the TV for a week, then started the search for who we could act with. Finding Women in Black was like coming home. We didn't really know the whole WiB agenda before we came, but we felt able to assume it would be a safe space. Now I really know it... A lot of women round the world have come to share that confidence in WiB.

Six women make up the organizing group of Gulf Coast WiB: Julia Aires, Edie Daly, Barbara Johnson, Diane Cardin-Kamleiter, Kath Madden Moxon and Jackie Mirkin. They range in age from mid-thirties to around seventy. Edie says, 'we're middle class white women, women who are available for actions, which means quite a few are retired or freelance. We've tried to draw in other kinds of women but so far we've failed.'

Some thumbnail sketches...

Edie and her partner *Jackie*, sixties/seventies, fit-looking, stocky, alert, energetic, are deeply identified with the local lesbian community and have for years put their formidable strength into its many activities, including 'Equality Florida'. Currently they are working hard to obtain a Human Rights ordinance in their locality. Edie specially values worldwide connectedness in the women's movement – she was at Greenham Common in 1984, in Sarajevo in 1993, in Beijing in 1995. She told me she and Jackie are the only lesbians in the organizing group. In some WiB groups identifications such as 'being

lesbian' (or 'being Jewish') consciously shape choices of agenda. But Jackie says, in Gulf Coast, 'we've never discussed who is what. It's a spiritual thing that unites us, not categories'. Edie told me

I'm in WiB so as to work with straight women, the ones who live in patriarchy. My own life is as far from patriarchy as I can get it. To me it's all connected. My lesbian self, my human rights legal self, my direct action self, my peaceful self. I won't work in a space where I can't bring all those parts of me to the table.

Barbara found WiB through the Internet and was inspired by what she read of its mission. She's a profoundly expressive woman, who gave me the sense that her awakening at a certain moment to 'the way women and children are recipients of this unending, insane violence', her horror at 'the way so many innocent people round the world are dying so brutally' just precipitated her, almost despite herself, onto the street in protest against war. As she spoke of these things, deeply moved by them, she was near tears. Above all she loves Women in Black for the silence of its vigils, 'that you don't have to speak'.

Julia is a calm, lovely, understated woman in her sixties, with grey hair, a young face, gentle movements. She was active already in the women's movement in the seventies and eighties. Deeply touched by experiences as a volunteer in Nicaragua and Cuba, she became a Quaker. Peace has combined with women as her central concern. Almost two decades back she helped start a Peace and Justice Centre in Sarasota, where she lives, which was a coalition of WILPF, Grey Panthers, Quakers, Church Women United and others. Now, along with Barbara (above) and Diane (below) she's putting a lot of energy into the Green Party in Florida.

Kath is the youngest of the group, a totally unique, tall, well-built woman, survivor of many life struggles. Her young son, Raven, 8 years old, came to our meeting. His name is only one of several evocations around Kath of a punk/gothic aesthetic, seen in her many tattoos and her curious e-mail name: gravegirl. Joining WiB and the Green Party are just two signs of how she's been re-evaluating her life since 2001 - as have (she feels) a lot of people in the USA. A strong motivation for Kath is opposing violence, the routine ill-treatment she sees around her in the community. Becoming a mother sharpened all these perceptions.

How to describe *Diane*? She's a professional accountant, late forties, a French-Canadian, Quebecoise, hints of a French accent. She has an unforgettable enthusiasm, humour, responsiveness. In fact I chose to fly to this WiB in Florida (despite the attractions of scores of other WiB groups around the USA) just because I couldn't resist the warm personality that leapt out of her e-mails. A very formative experience for Diane was teaching in the desperately poor and troubled country of Haiti, not so far from Florida across the Caribbean. She and her partner Mark, along with Barbara, Julia and Kath, put a lot of energy into the Green Party and bring green values to WiB.

Organizing, communicating, acting

Organizing

Organization in Gulf Coast WiB is minimalist. The core group may perhaps meet three times a year. Barbara says, 'we're exceptional in how much we can get done by phone and e-mail, because of the harmony in our group.' She says they're not competitive, there are no hard feelings or arguments. Leadership is truly shared. People take their own placards to the vigils and other events but there is an understanding that these are not aggressive. Edie for instance says she doesn't even like 'no to war', 'no to bombing' because these phrases contain the violence within them.

Communicating

They keep in touch by phone and e-mail. Their collective address womeninblackgulfcoast@yahooogroups.com is an interactive list, on which there are fifty or sixty names. A website is on the way. Diane takes a good deal of initiative in both local and international communications. She is on the English and French-language WiB international e-lists, and also subscribes to <womeninblackuscaucus> , transmitting news to and from the local group. WiB women perhaps always vary in the amount of regional and international communication they want, or can tolerate. Jackie feels she could do with more, relishes global connectedness. Others feel happy for Diane to filter the news.

Acting

WiB-GC doesn't hold a regular vigil (summers are too hot here). They tend to organize vigils or other actions to mark certain occasions. Diane recalled several events on the beach. Once, they wore the famous three black dresses and photographed the striking image of these sombre costumes on the sandy shore. They've done drumming and dancing on the beach in the name of WiB; an event with Native American women; and other inspiring and beautiful things. She said 'a bit of our identity here is that we schedule events round dates – international women's day, Martin Luther's birthday - and so we celebrate more than we mourn. We like to celebrate life and to party'.

This WiB have no particular physical site they've made their own. Responding to a call for solidarity actions in December 2001 by Gila Svirsky and other women in Israel, they drew 100 women into a walk through St.Pete, doing 2-minute silent stands at certain points. 'A startling silence.' When the invasion of Iraq approached in early 2003 they held a vigil in front of the offices of the mainstream newspaper in St.Petersburg. Their message to the editor was '30% of people round here are opposing the war, why don't you give them 30% of the coverage in your paper?' They also take the WiB banner to other organizations' frequent 'cornering' and protests, and of course they join the major demonstrations of the mainstream antimilitarist/antiwar movement. The focus of protest here is the local base, McDill, the central command for US

Forces Middle East, bristling with security. 'It's where the US top brass come together to strategize for the war on terror'.

But for my visit in May 2004 the group did organize a vigil. We were a line of six or seven women and two men, standing in the shade of two enormous, ancient, banyan trees, in a grassy place where the sea could be glimpsed twinkling through palm trees. We had a few simple banners and placards, one saying 'Peace cannot be achieved by violence'. We began in a circle, while Julia quietly drummed for us and Jackie read a passage from their leaflet.

Focus and strategy

The 'War on Terror'

The focus of WiB Gulf Coast's activism is war – specifically the policies of the Bush administration in its 'war on terror'. Women take their politics visibly into the outside world for (it seemed to me) two reasons. One is to have an effect on yourself, the other to influence passers-by.

The former was expressed well by Edie. She said engaging in WiB was important in 'validating my own inner values'. She said, 'I don't do it for the passers-by, but to be together with those women I stand with. For me it's the camaraderie. So I don't feel so alone. It's for changing myself'. Others said something like this too, that they were 'doing an individual action together because we like each other'. Yet, Edie also manifests, in the next breath, the other motivation – suggesting change to others. She went on to say, 'I only changed, myself, because I once saw someone else doing something and went and found out about it. So maybe someone could ask, seeing me there: what is it to be non-violent?'.

One of the others (I can't recognize the voice on the tape here) told me

We have to fight ignorance with knowledge. Education here is terribly poor. People don't know basic geography even. We're in the Bible Belt here, but they don't know we are bombing the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, lands of the Old Testament.

They aim to raise the consciousness of the people in their community, if necessary 'changing people one by one', 'hoping we may empower some one other person who was feeling alone', 'hoping they might get more courage to come out and join us'.

I asked whether they saw a route, a pathway, leading from changes they may work in the mind of the individual passer-by on the street through to changing the minds of politicians. Barbara was explicit about this. She said she felt that, despite a nominally representative mode of government it was little use to contact local congress members. On the other hand, 'If we stay at home, the government and military will think we don't care what they're doing'. When I pressed her: 'So when you go out on the street do you visualize a route to Bush? Will he know you care?' She replied, 'Bush says he doesn't pay

attention to demonstrations. But the rest of the world does. Our protests get archived and recognized.' So the strategy, as I've found with other WiB groups, can be visualized as acting locally, seeking to change individual minds, which will encourage people into collectively manifested protest, amplified by the media, to ultimately reach decision-makers.

Letting silence do the speaking

The group pursue this goal by modelling respect and non-violence in the symbolic way that's readily available to them: *silence*. A silence that startles, that wins attention. That models rather than teaches. Their principal and perennial statement reads like this:

The silenced ones who cannot talk for themselves are: the women, the children, the mothers, the fathers, the sisters, the brothers, the aunts and nieces..., all the humans deprived of their capacity to say: "enough of this already -- enough!"

Our silence provides an opportunity for the birds, the crickets, the squirrels, the lizards to express themselves, letting us hear their sounds and music of peace. Our silence lets them all show us all the peripheral beauty we are destroying everyday.

Our silence lets the land resonate by herself -- making us more aware that all the noise we make as humans is covering up our deeds of destruction pursued by greed while creating great distraction.

A distraction that victimises everyone.

A distraction that allows us to omit the forgotten ones.

We maintain silence as a loud sound addressed to all the misguided leaders of this planet.

They never tire of repeating these few words, which in a sense sum up their whole message and make other words redundant.

So, silence is clearly Gulf Coast WiB's trade mark. More than a trade mark – a key strategy. In January 2002, when three thousand men and women gathered at the gates of McDill, there was a podium and speeches. When WiBs turn came they distributed a flock of white paper doves among the crowd. And then they used their allotted time on the podium – all five minutes of it - to practice silence. Many felt this said more than all the words spoken into the microphone that afternoon.

Interesting - because silence in this place confronts sounds of terrible import. When the invasion began you could hear roaring planes, they told me, taking off from the runways of McDill to bomb Iraq. 'We heard the very sounds Iraqi women would hear a few hours later. From one Gulf to another!'

The violence of patriarchy

If the US government's pursuit of war as foreign policy is the sharp focus of Gulf Coast WiB, there's also an underlying concern about violence more generally, for instance violence in the home and community; and the violence of our practices of production and consumption.

Julia said 'We try to say more than just "no war in my name", to bring in the local as well as the global. For example, domestic violence features in our leaflets'. An incident in Kath's life had brought home to her the violence of US gun culture, the violence of those who invoke the death penalty, the state violence that enacts it. And the night I arrived in St.Petersburg I was made aware of the localness of violence by riots on the street in connection with a court case in which a black family had been refused compensation for the shooting of their 18-year-old son by police when he was pulled up during a traffic stop. The town was on the point of exploding with African Americans' anger and despair, white Americans' racism and fear.

The group's overlapping membership with the Green Party exemplifies the link they make between violence and the environment. Diane said, 'It's the war that brought us out. But we do see that really everything's connected – exploitation, our consumption practices.' A practice of non-exploitation and non-violence is therefore central for the group, and is exemplified in their link to the Quakers – not just through Julia's membership but because the Quakers are well-known and respected locally and are a fine model of non-violent process. If Diane consciously echoes Green thinking when she says 'We must not just talk the talk, but walk the walk,' she echoes Quaker thinking when she says 'The quietest voice at the table must be heard'.

Jackie said

WiB is the place I try to focus just on non-violence. Other things I'll act on, but not necessarily in WiB. Here I try to remain as focused as I can on my need to find non-violent ways of communicating with people who don't agree with me. In our WiB flyers we talk about 'all victims of violence'.

For Edie, beyond and behind the violence is power. Specifically, patriarchal power. 'It's patriarchy. It's power over, instead of shared power, power from within.' Edie is totally for revolutionary change: the patriarchy has to go, with all its structural violence and internalised oppression.

Co-operation with men

Like other WiBs, WiB-GC, based in St.Petersburg, are a small part of a large mosaic. They operate in an environment that includes a few other women's initiatives and many more mixed ones. Edie and Jackie belong to a neighbouring lesbian WiB as well, some miles away in Gulf Port where they live. There's a WiB in the city of Tampa too. In St.Pete there's a mixed

Coalition for Peace, holding weekly vigils downtown, while the form taken by the post-9/11 national coalition in Florida is United Voices for Peace.

The women of WiB encounter a problem with the masculinism, both of leadership and of style, in the mixed groups. Edie said, 'Even LGTB and Gay Pride is male dominated!' When the group participated in the mass UVP event at McDill they requested (and always do) that the speakers be equally women and men. Diane said, 'Militarists and anti-militarists too often sound the same. WiB tries to change the rhythm, the sound, the words that even men say....' They are very clear about the terms of their participation. 'I don't want to give myself into the hands of a leadership that I don't know where it will lead me. I want us to keep responsibility in our own hands'. She had felt the need to create a women's caucus even in the local Green Party.

With such awareness of a damaging masculinism in the surrounding movements, the inclusion of men in Gulf Coast WiB activities clearly didn't just happen by default. The six women in the organizing group came to women's activism by different routes. Some have long been comfortable with the word 'feminism' – indeed they might well feel they were among those who invented it! Others have become comfortable with it by seeing in practice what it means to the ones who use it. They all value a women's space in a world dominated by men. But they are open-minded about inclusion of some men in their activities. It is Diane and Julia's husbands who usually come along. Another regular is a Vietnam veteran. Before I came to St.Pete, Diane had written to me

Here in WIB-GC we welcome 'allies'. We define them as being men and children who stand with us and support our stand. Yet, they are not part of the decision-making process. It is a conscious collective decision we took at the beginning of our path, having learned from the past and the feminist experience of prior generations who came to regret the inclusion of men in their decision-making processes. Our allies here are fine with this model of decision-making -- as true 'allies' should be ;-)

In fact, WiB-GC have a particular reason to be proud of their men. Everyone had seen those startling photographs of women of Marin County spelling out the word 'peace' with their naked bodies, in the stunt they called Baring Witness. It was Gulf Coast men who took up the challenge (and off their clothes) to write their mantra with their bodies, vulnerable and pink on the bright green grass, under the eye of the camera.

Some of the things my visit to Gulf Coast WiB made me think about

The formative nature of links between WiBs and their local environments

For instance, the significance in this WiB of the Quakers, in part mediated through the experience of prior local peace work and local lesbian organizing that had been strongly shaped by Quaker process; and the significance of the

Green Party in defining an agenda that includes not only violence against women and in war but also violence against all life, and the earth itself.

The importance of a woman who communicates

I can see here how it's almost of defining importance, both in creating the reality of a local group, and in rendering it part of a global social movement, that a woman is prepared to play the role of communicator. It's Diane here in WiB-GC who does what's needed to channel information to and fro between members of the small core, the larger local group and the WiB international network, as well as tap into wider sources for political and feminist news. A similar role is played elsewhere, e.g. by Naomi in New York Thursday group, Stephanie in New York Wednesday group, and so on.

The perennial ambiguities around women / gender / working with men

In St.Pete I found the tensions I'm now becoming familiar with:

- between the wish for a women's space, and acknowledging that the only way forward is to help men change;
- between the conviction that women have something very particular to bring to issues of war / peace, and the belief that women and men are not essentially different in this or any other respect.

Thus, Jackie could say 'I'm *not essentialist*. It's feminist politics and theory that does it for me'. But is it so easy to abstract from the sexed and gendered body? Edie admitted that for her it had been a by-no-means-easy step to fully accept transgender members into the lesbian community in which she and Jackie are so significantly grounded. There is, I think, a feeling that if you believe, when it comes to transformative change, that 'gender relations', rather than 'womanhood' is the key concept, then you should act on this perception politically, and seek male allies. On the other hand, you can speak in a language of womanly values, marking an essentialist difference between women and men, as Julia did when she told me 'Men have a more violent and aggressive nature; *we're nurturing*, we have more of a concern for life'... without it implying separatism. She readily welcome men's presence on WiB actions.

It's as though a contradiction runs through both our reasoning *and* our feelings. Our thoughts flip between essentialism and anti-essentialism. And our gut reactions make us want to step aside from men and at the same time hold close to them. But then I say to myself 'How can we possibly expect to have resolved this conceptual dilemma in little WiB, when it's a central contradiction of the entire women's movement?!' A contradiction, what's more, that this week has left us giddy with confusion and wracked by distress, as every newspaper in the country shows photographs of laughing US women participating, with US men, in the humiliation and torture of Iraqi men in Abu Ghraib prison.

Contacts

This profile is based on a two-day visit to St.Petersburg, Florida, 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 all six members the organizing group – that is, Julia Aires, Edie Daly, Barbara Johnson, Diane Cardin-Kamleiter, Kath Madden Moxon and Jackie Mirkin –generously made themselves available for individual or group interview. Thanks to you all! And extra thanks to Diane Cardin-Kamleiter and Mark Kamleiter for inviting me to stay in their home and enjoy the exotic birds in and around their garden.

I returned a first draft of this Profile to each of the women I had interviewed, and received some helpful comments and amendments, which I took account of in producing a second draft. This second draft was eventually returned to everyone to ensure they would feel comfortable to have the profile put up on the WiB international website.

The main contact point for this WiB group is: < DCKamleiter@cs.com>

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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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