

**This Profile contains four mini-profiles of Women in Black groups in:**

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## **Women In Black In Torino**

In Torino I stayed with Elisabetta Donini for a couple of nights, and this gave me the chance of several long conversations with her. These were supplemented by an afternoon spent in collective interview with a threesome: Ada Cinato, Diana Carminati and Margherita Granero; followed by an evening when the remaining four women of the core group - Anna Valente, Patrizia Celotto, Filomena Filippis and Valeria Sangiorgi - each gave me a long statement about their relationship with Women in Black. The interviews varied in length and focus. I pursued the philosophy and politics of Women in Black more with some women than others. In certain cases I obtained more personal detail. In others I learned more of the history and philosophy of the group. These differences will be apparent in the following account.

### ***Donne in Nero* in Torino and its praxis**

The core group of Women in Black in Torino is approximately nine women, those whose names I mention above. In age they range from the late 30s to the 60s. Their vigils are held monthly on the last Friday of the month – women-only, wearing black. It's usual to have 12 or 15 women turning up, but, depending on the political moment, there could be 20 or 30. The vigils are silent - or at least, as they put it, 'there's an aspiration to silence!' They hold a single big banner with bold white writing on black reading *Io Donna Contro la Guerra – 1, a woman, against war*'. The place they've chosen to stand is an elegant street of shops and cafes, which links a railway station with the central Piazza Castello. Margherita said

We couldn't find a better place. For one thing there is a tradition of peace movement meetings in this square. And on Friday afternoons young people are coming in from the outskirts to the city. There are lots of passers-by.

They keep the vigils simple -- for instance they distribute leaflets but don't set up a table, so they don't need to ask for police permission.

I have a feeling that the vigil is a different experience for different women. Some are attracted to the moment as a time to 'reflect and observe'. But Margherita said, for her

It's heavy. An hour seems very long. I feel our lack of connection with the public. Young people aren't interested. It's as though we come from another world. I sometimes feel as if I'm from the moon. It drives home to me how distant we are from the majority, and I suffer from that.

The core group of *DiN* in Torino meet weekly on a Tuesday evening, usually at the *Casa delle Donne*. They bring food to share. The meeting just before the vigil is the most important, because it's when they redraft the leaflet. Each month they take a new theme, reflecting the current situation. For instance on Labour Day they wrote about 'war and work'. They pay great attention to the language, striving for clarity, and try to illustrate the political points they make with concrete examples. At the meetings they also update each other on the various projects the group has decided to be involved with. And they discuss their cooperation with other groups, locally, nationally and internationally.

Although they're regular, and vitally necessary, these weekly meetings aren't experienced as altogether satisfactory. 'There are too many things to deal with, and not enough time to deal with them in depth,' Ada said. Because the weekly meeting can be pressured and therefore 'rather superficial', and because they know it's important to take time to deal with any tensions arising in the group, they occasionally organize longer meetings. Like most women's peace groups, they set store by the principal of 'the coherence (*coherencia*) of means and ends', ie. that they should relate to each other in a way which prefigures the respectful and non-violent world they're struggling to create.

The group formally calls itself 'Women in Black of the *Casa delle Donne* of Torino'.<sup>1</sup> They would hesitate to speak of 'Women in Black Italy' or even 'Women in Black Torino', they say, because there's no coordination. 'We feel responsible for our own choices', Elisabetta said.

They communicate with each other through a simple list of e-mail addresses (they don't have a group address) and the acknowledged coordinator and contact woman for the Torino group is Margherita. As yet they have no website. Margherita and one or two other women in the group obtain international news by being on the WiB English-language international mailing list co-ordinated by Lieve Snellings. Sometimes international news arrives in Italian language -- translated by Marianita in Padova from the French-language version of the international mailings co-ordinated by Edith Rubinstein in Brussels. Some women are on the personal mailing lists of active WiBs elsewhere, notably Nadia Cervoni in Roma, Luisa Morgantini in Brussels, and Gila Svirsky in Jerusalem. On the whole they feel well connected, and don't hunger for more news than they get. Mostly the women are happy to have somebody else filtering the information for them -- it can otherwise become overwhelming.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the women now active in *DiN* in Torino were involved from the start in the setting up of the *Casa della Donna*, for which they first squatted an empty building. The *Casa* became and remains a focal point of feminist culture and politics in the city. It houses several activities including groups responding to domestic violence, and concerned with women's health and self-determination.

*Donne in Nero* in Torino aren't an organisation as such, they're not registered with any authority. Nor are they funded in any regular way. They've received grants from time to time, for instance from the Equal Opportunities office of the city municipal authority. But, they say, 'we're not very good at fundraising'. When women incur expenses, for example travelling abroad, they mostly pay for themselves or share costs between them. But the group has received support for its involvement in specific projects. There are three such projects on hand at the moment.

(1) They're funded by the Torino municipal authority to participate in the World Health Organisation project EPIC, which links European cities with cities in Israel and Palestine. Torino is linked with Haifa and Gaza, working on projects concerning women.

(2) They're involved in a European Union 'Euro-Gaza' project with other European towns, which has involved them in six visits to Gaza in two years. They participate as Women in Black, and make visits to women's centres, but (like EPIC) the project as a whole involves both men and women. Diana is centrally involved, along with Margherita and Elisabetta.

(3) Then there is the Breza project, Margherita's special concern, based in a small Bosnian town. In this *DiN* are not involved as such - but they support the involvement of Margherita and Valeria. The project manages a women's centre and has carried out cervical cancer testing and income generation. It is funded by Torino Municipality and private institutions.

## History and development of *DiN* in Torino<sup>2</sup>

In 1982 the Maronite Christian militia, with Israeli backing, brutally attacked two Palestinian refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, in Israeli-occupied Beirut, leaving many dead. Later, in May 1985, the Amal militia laid siege to the camps for three years.<sup>3</sup> In 1987, at the height of the siege, Elisabetta wrote a letter to the Italian daily newspaper *Il Manifesto*. 'As women,' she said, 'we can't accept this!' There was an immediate response to this letter from a wide range of women -- in the trade unions, the Communist Party, the women's movement. Within a week a small group had got together around the issue. In Torino they called themselves *Non Ci Basta Dire Basta* (It's Not Enough to Say Enough). They meant, 'We have to act'. In September 1987, six women from Torino, Rome and Bologna, flew to Beirut. They were Elisabetta, Margherita, Raffaella Lamberti, Luisa Morgantini, Alessandra Mecozzi, Diana Corossacz and Maria Quattrociochi.

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<sup>2</sup> It was mainly Elisabetta who gave me this account of the past.

<sup>3</sup> 'Virtually all the houses in the camps were reduced to rubble and the inhabitants were reduced to eating rats, dogs, and cats. There were even requests made to religious authorities for permission to keep the dead. The death tolls are imprecise, but many thousands died.' (Quoted from [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org) 26.06.05)

It was a disappointing visit. They spent 10 days in Beirut trying to get to grips with the situation. They visited the camp at Shatila. But they found it impossible to make contact with any Lebanese women who weren't associated with one faction or another in the conflict. They concluded it was going to be impossible to bring together Lebanese, Israeli and Palestinian women, as they'd hoped. They returned to Torino, and decided to try a different tack.

Some of them went to Israel and Palestine, where, 20 years after the start of the Occupation, the Palestinians had begun their Intifada. 'We used our existing friendship networks there,' Elisabetta said. 'We were trying to take the first step on the ground, contacting women on both sides.' In the summer of 1988 they organised a 'camp' in Jerusalem, attended by 68 Italian women, from a lot of different Italian towns. They called it 'The Peace Camp'.

Some of them were feminists, some from women's movement organisations, some from the *PCI*, and four members of Parliament -- also trade union women [Elisabetta said]. We positively aimed for complexity.

Around 15 women participated from Torino, and other large groups went from Rome and Bologna. The organising group in Rome were from the *Associazione per la Pace*; in Bologna it was a feminist group *Orlando*, with which Raffaella was involved; and in Torino it was *Non Ci Basta Dire Basta*. This travelling group would soon take the name Women Visiting Difficult Places – *Visitare Luoghi Difficili (VLD)*. After these travels, they collectively wrote a book with title *Donne a Gerusalemme*.

Soon there were a lot of women's initiatives in different Italian cities supporting Palestinian women. They were also in touch with the network of anti-Occupation activists that was beginning to form in Israel, calling itself Women in Black. A lot of the Italian women joined Israeli women in their vigils in Jerusalem, and were very moved by this experience. When the women from Rome came back home, they held a vigil, modelling themselves on the Israeli women, at the 'Altar of the Fatherland' (yes, that's what it's called!). They began to name themselves *Donne in Nero*.

Some of the Italian group organised a huge event in Jerusalem called 'Time for Peace' at the end of 1989, involving 2000 European men and women, more than half Italian, and more than half women. Along with the Israeli peace movement they made a chain around the Jerusalem walls. Women had motivated this action and were its leaders. There was in fact a 'women's day'. They marched from from the place where the Women in Black traditionally stood in vigil in West Jerusalem, to East Jerusalem where Palestinian women were waiting to greet them. It was risky to cross this line from either side. They were attacked by the police.

That October, 1988, the Italian women who joined the traditional annual pacifist march from Perugia to Assisi wore black, though without taking the name Women in Black. In fact, they would continue with the name *VLD* until

the mid-90s. But by 1990 when the Gulf War was threatening, there were more than 80 *Donne in Nero* groups across Italy. They were obliged to be active now on a wider theme: opposing the use of war as a tool of international policy.

Now our own state came into focus for us [said Elisabetta]. We belonged to a state that would be one of the belligerents in this coming war. We'd gone to Israel and Palestine not so much as Italians, but as Europeans. We'd been thinking of our responsibility for the Shoa. This was different. Now we had to be active with the Italian left in opposing the policy of the Italian state.

1991 saw not only the international war in the Persian Gulf<sup>4</sup>, but the collapse of the Soviet Union and increasing tension in Yugoslavia. This threat of war in a country with which Italy shared a border felt disturbingly close to home. In the summer, some of the women of *VLD* and the *Associazione per la Pace* went to make contact with Serbian and Croatian women and consult on ways women could oppose the impending war. In September, Chiara Ingrao and women from northern Italy organised a peace caravan which attempted to cross the new ethnic borders in the disintegrating Yugoslavia. On 9 October 1991, Stasa Zajovic and other women in Belgrade stood for the first time in Republic Square opposing the nationalist aggression of the Milosevic government with banners reading *Zene u crnom protiv Rata* - Women in Black against War. The name and practice of Women in Black had spread from Israel via Italy to Yugoslavia, and as the wars in the Balkans continued, it would become a worldwide network.

The efforts of women of north-east Italian cities as *Donne in Nero*, directed towards the former Yugoslavia, went on alongside the continuing work in Israel and Palestine by Torino women still using the name of *Visitare Luoghi Difficili*. At this time, they were supporting WFPP, the organization of Women for Political Prisoners. They 'adopted' political prisoner Fatma Abubakra, and visited her family in the refugee camp of Khan Younis when she was in prison. They started an initiative that sponsored individual girl children in Palestine. They also organized several meetings in Torino to bring together Palestinian and Israeli women, 'to show that even in a war you can make peaceful connections and have dialogue.'

But after the Oslo Accords were signed, and it seemed that peace was on the way, they wound down activity in Israel/Palestine. Attention turned to the ethnic aggressions in former-Yugoslavia, where central Bosnia and Sarajevo were under siege. They attended several of the annual international encounters organised by *Zene u crnom* at Novi Sad. They'd continue, now called '*Donne in Nero della Casa delle Donne di Torino*', to oppose Serb

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<sup>4</sup> *DiN* published a special issue of the review *Inchiesta*, under the title *Pace e Guerra in Medio Oriente: Percorsi di Donne* (1991). It has presentations by Palestinian women, by Israeli women and a joint section called 'Meeting Moment'. In 1999, they published a second significant booklet, a thematic edition of the journal *Quaderni* on 'War in the Thought and Words of Women'. About relations between Serb and Kosovan women in the Kosovo war, it was published by the Peace and Solidarity Department of the City of Torino.

ethnic aggression in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Belgrade and Kosovo during 1998 and 99. Now we were a nation clearly taking part in war [said Elisabetta]. US bases in north-east Italy were bombing Serbia.

They were again obliged to turn their attention to Israel and Palestine when in September 2000 the Al-Aqsa intifada broke out and was brutally repressed by the Israeli military. Luisa Morgantini initiated a scheme called '*Io Donna Vado In Palestina*' in which every week for three months a new group of Italian women would visit the region, aiming to monitor the checkpoints and reduce violence. Joined by other women, they called this *Donne in Nero e Non Solo* (Women in Black but Not Only).

Then came 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US 'war on terror', the bombing of Afghanistan and eventually the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Italian government signed up its armed forces as part of Bush's 'coalition of the willing'.

We wrote leaflets opposing the Bush doctrine that freedom can only be assured by endless war. Our pacifism was becoming more and more open [said Elisabetta].

The Gulf War, the sanctions against Iraq and now the invasion of Iraq were a very different experience for *Donne in Nero* from Israel/Palestine and the former Yugoslavia, because it's been almost impossible to establish contact with Iraqi women in Iraq. They tried to keep informed through the journalist Giuliana Sgrena who is a personal friend. (She would later be taken hostage in Iraq.) But Elisabetta said

It's difficult if you don't have the sustained relationship with local women. *Donne in Nero* traditionally relies on direct acquaintanceship, a shared process. This is why, for instance, we're not active at present on Darfur. It's a question of responsibility. Occasionally a visiting Iraqi woman would come, and sometimes the politics were difficult.<sup>5</sup>

### **Women's personal trajectories**

How did these women come to be where they are today? Their stories are intertwined at many points in the last three decades, and in some ways each has helped the other to become who she is.

We could begin with **Patrizia**, whose employment is that of school librarian. She's a good starting point, because as we've seen, *DiN* in Torino is firmly based in the *Casa delle Donne*, and Patrizia is one of its founders and long-

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<sup>5</sup> Many of us have found it difficult to identify Iraqi women organising against the US invasion of Iraq who are not apologists for the Saddam Hussein regime. It's a perennial problem for women peace activists who are looking for a response to conflict that does not assume 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. London Women In Black discussed this in an article that can be seen on my weblog [www.cynthiacockburn.org](http://www.cynthiacockburn.org), under the title 'Being able to say neither/nor'. Women in Black in Belgrade achieved this in an exemplary way in opposing both the nationalist aggressions of Milosevic and the NATO bombing of Belgrade and Kosovo.

time manager. She says, 'I was born in this house'. She means, born as a feminist.

In the 1970s, she says, the women's movement was large and visible all around her. When some feminist groups in the city, to which Patrizia belonged, first squatted a building and opened the *Casa*, war and opposition to war was not a theme they addressed. Male violence against women at home and in the community was an important issue, but this was not consciously connected with violence against women in war. And Patrizia certainly wouldn't have called herself a pacifist at that time. She explained

In Italy in the 1970s, we feminists weren't involved in any kind of peace movement. Quite the contrary, we had this perspective of international wars of 'liberation' -- for instance in Latin America. We believed then in the myth of a 'just war', including the resistance in Vietnam. We didn't see resistance as violence.

But then, at the beginning of the 1990s when the Gulf War and the wars in Yugoslavia were happening, 'War after war, I had to become a pacifist -- so many wars!' That's when she got involved with Women Visiting Difficult Places. But she was always more involved with women in the former Yugoslavia than with those in Israel/Palestine. Her family comes from an area near the border with the former Yugoslavia. And she admires greatly the 'ability of the women in Belgrade to elaborate the thinking in that situation'. Today, in a sense, Patrizia 'hosts' *Donne in Nero* at the *Casa*, where she's to be found most days.

**Anna** has quite a different history. While studying to become an engineer she was active in the student movement. It was the 1968 era, time of revolutions. In the early '70s she went to work as an engineer in an aircraft factory producing military planes. She was a union representative. At that time few trade unionists were aware of any ethical problem in their involvement with arms manufacture. Then some of them, including Anna, attended some courses under the progressive '150-hours' educational provision for workers. 'It was really consciousness-raising!' She said. 'But it was pretty contradictory for me, because the work on military aircraft was much more interesting than other kinds of engineering, which can be really boring.'

At the same time she was getting more alert to gender issues. A group of women was emerging in the unions and their women-only activity met with resistance from the men. 'This struggle opened my eyes to the links between feminism and trade unionism. For me, the contradiction about the work grew - - of course!'. She began to meet with Margherita and other women, involved in issues about opposition to militarism and of arms factories. They called themselves Women Against Weapons (*Donne Contro Arme*). Eventually, two years before Italy joined in the Gulf War Anna really knew she had to change her job. By now she was very active in the anti-war movement, using her knowledge and background to focus on the issue of Italian arms manufacture. Soon she would be very involved in Women in Black.

**Valeria** has mostly done factory work for a living -- but on her own initiative she learned the techniques of photography and journalism. In her spare time she's written for a feminist journal, worked on radio and television production and used photography for many purposes. Her involvement with women began at neighbourhood level where she made relationships in a local group. This grassroots engagement was foundational for her. She started coming to the *Casa*. A concern with war and peace came later, but the seeds were sown in her childhood.

My grandmother was killed by a US bomb at the very end of World War II [she said]. And my grandfather was killed by a German soldier. These murders conditioned my life. After the war, when I was still a little baby, my mother and I moved from Venice to Torino. We came alone as strangers to this town.

It was in 1993 that Valeria met up with the group that was just renaming itself *Donne in Nero*. The thing about the group that struck her most, she says, was its 'expressive modality'. Pacifism was a new concept for her. 'I wasn't a pacifist when I was young. In fact in industrial strike action, I remember I was quite aggressive.' But now, through meeting women in Israel and Palestine (she went on one of those week-long visits) and in the former Yugoslavia, she got deeply involved in Women in Black. She's the one now whose photographs document, beautifully, Women in Black activity in Torino and elsewhere. She is building an archive for the movement.

**Ada** is a wordsmith. She's worked in publishing, editing and translating, for getting on for over 30 years. She's fluent in German, English and French as well as Italian. In the late '60s she took part in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. And there was of course also an 'antinuclear' campaign in the context of the Cold War, at this time. But Ada's main activism lay elsewhere. In those years she was also involved in the struggles to close the old 'asylums', violent institutions, in which people being "different" because of their psychic problems (often mainly of social origin) were segregated and deprived of every human dignity. She met the feminists in Torino in the early 70s and was cofounder of a "centre for the women's health", in which information about contraceptives were given and women could discuss with each other also about the question of abortion and the right of self-determination of women on the termination of a pregnancy. Since then she was always active in the feminist movement and in different groups of the *Casa delle Donne*.

During the Gulf War they were all involved in mass demonstrations, and there she met Margherita and through her the women of *Visitare Luoghi Difficili*. Soon she was involved with them in supporting the women in Israel and Palestine, and then in Yugoslavia. Ada values the separate space *DiN* provides in which women can think about issues of war and peace.

I needed to deconstruct the things that had influenced me in my education. As a young girl, I'd really adopted a masculine mentality. I'd tried to acquire a men's role. It took a long time of frequenting women

in the 1960s and '70s to change that, to get a critical mind towards patriarchy. It only came by reflection among other women. And we've never finished growing that consciousness, inventing ourselves.

You can see that **Margherita's** name is mentioned by several women as an early contact and friend in peace activism. For many years she worked as an office employee at Olivetti, and was not involved in trade union activism. She was active in the *Casa delle Donne*, though, and was quickly involved in peace activity once it began in the 1980s. It was really in getting involved in the mixed-sex *Associazione per la Pace* (many of whose men, Margherita says, are feminists as well as pacifists) and then starting *Visitare Luoghi Dificile* with Elisabetta in 1988, that the connection between war and gender became crystal clear to her. She says

I began to see how war is different for men and women. From that experience I built a knowledge of other differences. I began to think about the aggressivity model of masculinity -- how even little boys do it.

An interesting piece of connectivity within the core group is the relationship between Diana and Filomena, a generation apart. **Diana** has recently retired from the University. As a young woman in the early '70s she was militant in the left. Of course in those days these groups involved both men and women. She says, 'I felt uncomfortable, even anguished at times, facing the power I felt in even Leftist men.' In the 1980s she separated from all groups and was neither in left politics nor in the *Casa delle Donne*. In the University she taught gender studies and history. Her main concern there, she says, was how to communicate meaningfully with the students. 'I was always looking for a language with which to reach them.'

In 1991 at the time of the Gulf War, Diana opposed the war but not as a feminist. It was only later that she met *DiN*.

Then I immediately realised this was a different modality of relationship they had. Elisabetta was and is a leader in a quite different way. She gave me empowerment for the first time, as I'd never felt it in mixed groups. A way to build a new identity as a feminist and pacifist, a real identity that fitted me – in relation with others, with other women.

**Filomena** is in her 30s. She came into *DiN* through being Diana's student. In the early '90s, then a teenager, she'd been unaware of the Gulf crisis and other impending wars. All that was a long long way from her everyday life. She was in secondary school in a small town. The family came from South Italy and her parents were very conservative. 'There were no political conversations in my home,' she said. She remembers some young communist men coming to visit the school. They were involved in a struggle to close an arms factory (resonance with Anna here!). This was Filomena's first encounter with politics. It stirred something in her that woke again when she went to the University to study history in Diana's department. She was touched by a lecture Diana gave about the war in Yugoslavia and by a course she gave on 'identity'.

When she started University, Filomena was married and had a little daughter. Then she dropped out of university and had her second child. It was only two or three years later that she came back and asked Diana to be her supervisor. Filomena heard Margherita when she came to the University to give a guest lecture on the Bosnian war. Then Diana suggested Women in Black as a theme for her thesis. Filomena said

I was fascinated by their modality. A very small group with a lot of courage, presenting itself to the public, refusing war. Especially in the context of Israel and Yugoslavia, where the women were seen as traitors for resisting ethnic aggression. It was dangerous for them.

So from being an academic thesis, Women in Black has turned into a political life for Filomena, a thought she finds beautiful. In 2003 she attended the biennial international encounter of Women in Black at Marina di Massa and heard Stasa Zajovic, who is often a spokesperson for *Zene u crnom* in Belgrade.

Meeting Stasa was for me a very meaningful, fundamental experience [Filomena said]. Sometimes people say the family's what matters most. But here I've found women among whom I can discover my real self. I feel empowered by them.

**Elisabetta** is different again. She was a theoretical physicist by training and became a teacher - for a long period in a university in southern Italy - a career from which she's now retired. As a scientist she was interested in the politics of science and gradually began to shift her research gaze from scientific matters to the sociology and history of science itself. The nuclear accident at Chernobyl and its effect on the environment and on human life was a turning point for her. She began organising against nuclear power and nuclear weapons, pointing to the links between science, war and power.

At the start Elisabetta wasn't thinking as a feminist. But she saw the way the Chernobyl disaster affected women's lives in particular -- not being able to eat the vegetables they grew, unable to feed their children safely. 'I began to make the connection between science, everyday life and women.' She discovered the feminist analysts of science -- Sandra Harding, Carolyn Merchant, Evelyn Fox Keller. 'It was very energizing, this possibility of reshaping my idea of the world by this approach.'

Elisabetta was a prime mover in *Visitare Luoghi Difficili*. We saw above how it was her letter to *Il Manifesto* that sparked the movement, and she has continued to do a lot of the writing that emanates from the group, and to be central to its philosophical and political discussions.

**Giulia** is the youngest of this group, a student of twenty three studying for the specialist degree in International Relations and Defence of the Human Rights at the Torino University. She has known Women in Black for some time, having met them on the occasion of the demonstrations against the war in

Afghanistan and Iraq. She joined the Torino group in February 2005 after writing her first level thesis on the Geneva agreement between Israelis and Palestinians of December 2003. She is very pleased to be one of the group because it has opened up new opportunities, knowledge and experiences for her, such as the journey to Palestine/Israel in August 2005, when she took part in the XII International Conference of the Women in Black in Jerusalem.

### **Why women?**

I tried to get a sense why being active as *women* against war seemed important to these women. Elisabetta saw the reasons more clearly when she looked back over time.

Already in the 1970s we were beginning to understand that our problems didn't derive uniquely from capitalism. If it was social justice and peace we were seeking, women would be effective. And in the '80s we felt really powerful as women, there was a feeling we were capable of changing the world. For instance, the meetings we had about the peace camp at the *Casa delle Donne* - so many women, so strong! Women were realising how the male model is unjust, how it puts the survival of human life and the planet at risk. We saw clearly how war was rooted in the male attitude of domination - dominating women and the world.

Even in the PCI and the trade union women were thinking this way at that time. Someone like Elisabetta, an autonomous woman outside the structures, could find common ground with them in the desire to be active. She was finding that working with women was quite different at an emotional level from working with men.

Now it's become my normality [she says], my way of living and being a political subject. But I hadn't been involved in a movement against domestic violence, male violence against individual women. I came from a more collective way of seeing problems. But then I saw, I had to accept, that it was only by listening to other women's experience I could get an understanding of violence.

For Patrizia too violence had been a key issue. Meeting women, finding the women's movement, had been a chance to engage in political work without the violence that was current among some activist elements in the second half of the '70s. 'Some of those groups were very violent indeed, in politics and in interpersonal relations -- including violence against women.' When it came to being active against war, who else would she do it with than with women?

For Ada the reason is processual. She feels the process of making connection with other people one by one is specific, and basic, to a women's politics, and that's why we can't separate 'women' from 'war'. 'The way we discuss, the way we speak with others, it's comfortable for me. We give importance to relationship, to being directly responsible, each one of us.' But it's also been about finding a form of politics that doesn't deny women's difference.

In the old politics it was difficult to be 'different'. We couldn't use our ordinary way of behaving, as women - in the trade unions for example. They didn't take account of difference, or accept it. I like the way [in *DiN*] we're aware of difference, we don't refuse it.

For Diana the answer to my question 'why organise with women?' lay in the kind of relationships it made possible. We saw above how ~~she~~ happily she had evaded what she calls 'the aggressive modality of patriarchy' and embraced that of *VLD* and Women in Black. She went on

Now that's the kind of relationship I require with men too. When I encounter a mixed group, or even among women, I use that as a criterion. I recognize it when I see it. If I can't find it then I won't work with them. As a methodology we must pay attention to the other. Even if sometimes we fail.

### **Political context and 'allies'**

First and foremost, what's striking to me coming from London, where things are very different, is that a women's movement really exists even now in Torino, and Italy more generally – though Italy haven't had the kind of regional feminist 'coordinations' they developed in Spain. The *Casa delle Donne* and its affiliated groups are at the heart of the movement in Torino, but it's not the only thing. One effective organisation is the Intercultural Women's Centre, otherwise known as the *Associazione Almaterra*, which unlike Women in Black is a registered entity. They work with migrant women in the city, and *DiN* co-operate with them on several projects. Individually the women of *DiN* aren't limited to anti-war activity but get involved in all kinds of feminist campaigns -- currently they were energetically campaigning against confirmation of the law that would curtail women's reproductive rights.

There are also women 'in the institutions', Ada told me, with whom they stay in touch. Some of these are feminists, now with positions in equal opportunities committees or women's consultative committees at the various levels of government: the municipality, the province and the region. Torino municipality is controlled by the centre-left at present, which makes it an easier mark for lobbying than the rightwing national government. The women outside need the women inside for help with funding, and *DiN* support the insiders in being vocal in the local authority on the issue of Italy and war.

Elisabetta said 'In *DiN* we don't stress the level of official politics much. We prefer autonomy -- maybe that makes us narrow.' As to the ~~extra-~~Parliamentary left, there are several parties with a presence in Torino: *Rifondazione Comunista*, the *Partito dei Comunisti Italiani* and the *Democratici di Sinistra*, the Left Democrats, all inheritors of the former Communist Party of Italy (*PCI*). The women join with them in mass demonstrations and, for instance, in planning around the World Social Forum.

But, as we have found in other cities and other countries, their masculine leadership and authoritarian style aren't easy for women to work with.

Then there is the peace movement. Conscientious objection doesn't provide a basis for it in Italy because there is now a civil option in place of military service. And the *Associazione per la Pace* is rather small in Torino. Margherita is *DiN*'s the main connection to them. They, part of trade union movement and other groups are linked loosely in a coordination called the *Tavola della Pace* (the Peace Table).

For Women in Black in Torino the most important links are those with other Women in Black groups in Italy. They are particularly close to those in the northern cities of Verona, Udine and Padova. In 2003 many Italian *DiN* groups were involved in organizing the biennial international encounter of Women in Black at Marina di Massa. They worked well and hard together on this project, but came away from that event feeling a certain disappointment in the quality of relationship and cooperation among Italian Women in Black. A contradiction arises sometimes between, on the one hand, the unspoken principle of the equality and autonomy of the many *DiN* groups scattered around the country and the need for a shared politics. The diversity of *DiN* throughout Italy is welcome -- nobody wants a line! But it sometimes seems (Elisabetta said) as though not everyone everywhere understands clearly or gives importance to the origins and meaning of Women in Black.

Another contradiction is between that same principle of equality and autonomy and the undeniable weight of Rome. *DiN* in Rome is large and very significant in the overall scheme of things, nationally and internationally. Some women in Rome would like *DiN* to become a formal organisation, while some women in the Torino group feel strongly opposed to this idea. One member of the Rome group, Luisa Morgantini, is a founder member and spokesperson of the national *Associazione per la Pace*. She is also a Member of the European Parliament where she speaks effectively and tirelessly on issues of women, war and peace. She's an international figure, travelling frequently to war zones, and especially sustaining connections between Women in Black groups in Israel and Palestine, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Her leadership is widely acknowledged to be an important source of strength for Women in Black. But being individual, it has a 'downside' -- it has been experienced as disempowering at times. It is important (the group feel) not to delegate decision-making to her. Though easier, it can sometimes lead to difficulties.

I found some conflicting feelings too about Women in Black as an international network. On the one hand, women feel being a national and international 'name' does give them strength. And they've witnessed the capacity of the network, using its e-mail connections, to organise global actions, such as the simultaneous vigils in more than 150 places worldwide on the anniversary of the Israel/Palestine Six-Day War in 2002, or the global petition for the release of the hostage Giuliana Sgrena. This they've felt to be empowering. And Valeria for instance referred to the mass demonstrations

organised around the world in February 2003 against the war on terror, saying 'I'd hope that sometime in the future Women in Black would be able to put on that kind of mass action, with millions of women. That's what I'd like to see.'

On the other hand, as Elisabetta put it, 'There's more to a global social movement than an e-mail network'. She does not believe that Women in Black groups in various countries are clear about what they actually agree on. The Marina di Massa encounter had brought together some very disparate groups and ideas which did not have adequate discussion or resolution. It was unclear to her 'what we really shared'. What common process were we likely to find to dismantle militarism and patriarchy? To be 400 women together helped us feel strong perhaps, but it did little to clarify our relations with each other. Elisabetta is fearful of the institutionalisation of Women in Black as an 'umbrella of everything'.

I'm more confident of shared practices we might develop than of our big international meetings. Only if you share some practice can you say you're really in touch. You can communicate in writing, but if you aren't experiencing being effective together in some shared reality, what does it mean?... It's risky to use the name Women in Black like a kind of United Nations.

While they see the value in the 'symbolic contagion' that's disseminated the Women in Black idea so rapidly, there's a danger that it can be an empty icon. In the end, women feel best about international action when they know women personally in other countries who they can work with. They feel effective in their activism around Israel and Palestine and in the Balkans precisely because they've built trustworthy relationships with the women there. They feel less confident about engaging on Colombia, Iraq, or Darfur where they don't yet have such relationships with women, and where the activity would seem merely ideological.

### **Political philosophy: what do we think we are doing?**

In the course of this research I've visited a lot of countries and women's groups, and these visits have given rise to quite a few theoretical questions still unresolved for me. At the point I arrived in Torino there were several conceptual issues I wanted to ask them about.

#### *Twin 'pillars' of Women in Black?*

I asked the group whether they agreed with what I sometimes hear women say -- that there are two main political intentions or principles in Women in Black internationally. One is this theme of taking responsibility for monitoring and challenging one's own state, the things that are done 'in our name'. The second is building bridges between women in our own countries and women elsewhere; women in war zones and those in war-delivering countries; and between women on the opposite 'sides' of armed conflict.

Mostly they agreed with this and gave examples from their practice, some of which I've described above. But for Elisabetta the first (dealing with your own state) was the key idea of Women in Black, inherited from the group in Jerusalem whose primary task was challenging the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. We saw that the women who would become *DiN* in Torino began their work together in the 1980s by reaching out to women in war zones – Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and then Yugoslavia. It had been a shock to them in the 1990s to come to terms with the fact that their own country, Italy, was a direct aggressor, first in the Gulf, then in the NATO bombing of Belgrade and Kosovo, later in the invasion of Iraq. They joined the big demonstrations of women and men opposing these interventions and they produced leaflets and talked with members of the public to generate awareness about the Italian government's role. They would press the local municipality to take a stand on issues of militarism and war. When the right came to power under Berlusconi, especially from 2001, they would also increasingly challenge the government on aspects of its internal policy, for example on immigration and security.

Elisabetta felt it would be claiming too much to say that 'building bridges' was the second pillar of Women in Black. We were not really effective on this front. In Torino they'd not found it at all easy to foster the unsteady relationship between women across the Green Line between Israel and the West Bank. It was Bat Shalom and the Jerusalem Center for Women in Jerusalem, not Women in Black, who mainly did that difficult and much needed work.

The solidarity work we did with Palestinians - for instance the project 'adopting' young girls - that's not doing much towards a peace process. Palestine alone can't solve the problem. So we must also support the internal opposition in Israel. And we did try to be a vehicle through which Palestinian women would become aware it exists. In that sense in going as Women in Black to Palestine I go there 'like' an Israeli.

So on whether we do 'bridge building' – the answer is yes and no. The practice of sharing emotions, experiences, *is* a feminist characteristic of Women in Black. A personal and direct connection is a necessary condition of what we do. But you can't compare that with 'building a bridge' across the Israeli wall.

So 'crossing borders', which this group and other Italian *DiNs* have certainly done a lot of, is by no means the same thing as 'building bridges'. And I can see that very often the aspiration to build bridges hasn't been translated into reality. *Zene u crnom* of Belgrade, in the context of Serbian nationalism, despite their brave politics of 'we won't be enemies', actually found it distressingly difficult to keep communication open with Albanian women in Kosovo during the war of 1998-9. Just as the Israeli 'Jewish' women found it difficult in actual fact to maintain communication with Palestinian women during the Gulf War when they were living in fear of Scud missile attacks while many Palestinians were cheering on Saddam Hussein.

*' Transversal politics'*

In a way this reply was disheartening, because Elisabetta and other Italian women have been greatly valued by me and others for their work on identity politics, and particularly for evolving the concept of *politica trasversale* - something Nira Yuval-Davis, and later I too, went on to elaborate as 'transversal politics' (Yuval-Davis 1997, Cockburn 1998 and 1999). But then I came to understand that her tough judgment on what they (and we and others) had actually been achieving / failing to achieve during these (and other) wars was a necessary reminder of the difference between theory and praxis, between rhetoric and reality. In a way the art of transversal politics is the art of the impossible. It's a sisyphian task that must be forever attempted even if you have no reason to believe you can succeed.

Elisabetta believes it was actually Raffaella Lamberti of the *Associazione Orlando* in Bologna who first used the term *politica trasversale*. But certainly together they had been writing about nation, national identity, gender and identity politics from around 1991. A flurry of thinking and writing occurred around these themes in connection with the seminal meeting they organized in 1992 of twelve Palestinian, twelve Israeli and twelve Italian and other women in Bologna. A few papers have survived from this time in English translation and my discussion here draws on two of them (*Donne in Nero* 1991, 1992) together with an article some of the Torino women prepared in English for a book planned by the Israeli WiB but never published (*Donne in Nero* 1993).

At the conference, which was prepared in a very thorough and responsible process, the Palestinian group were asked to introduce the theme of 'fundamentalism'. The Israeli group, coordinated by Yvonne Deutsch, would address 'militarism and nationalism'. The Italian group, coordinated by Elisabetta and Raffaella, was to take responsibility for 'gender and nation'. It was very relevant to their handling of the latter topic that Nira Yuval-Davis was present at the Bologna meeting and her ideas were influential on the Italian women. At that time Nira's book *Gender and Nation* was yet to be published, but her book with Floya Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State*, had been in circulation three years. Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas etc.* was available and *The Morning After* would appear the following year.

The entry of Italy into the Gulf War brought the realization that war was being waged 'in their name'. The 'black thread' of Women in Black linking them genealogically to the Israeli women in Jerusalem was tangible and real now. Just like the Israeli women, they could not accept the national name with which they were labelled, but neither could they facilely refuse it and deny responsibility. So this was a fertile moment for thinking carefully about their own gender and national identities, in the light of current theories of identity which were stressing that subjectivity cannot be read off from 'name', that identities are complex and multilayered, changing and constructed – with a degree of individual agency – rather than given and fixed. They wrote 'in the process of "becoming subjects" each of us perceives herself as a complex

universe, interlaced by a multiplicity of levels..interconnected...not reducible one to the other.’ Each one of these belongings they said, involves a decision, ‘agency’ (*DiN* 1992:12).

The important idea current at this conference was that political action could not be based on a simple and fixed idea of identity – for instance, a women’s ‘identity politics’ that relied on the notion of ‘global sisterhood’. Women are not merely women. They have an individual relationship with other identifiers such as race, nation, ethnicity, religion etc. Thus what unites us, e.g. being women, at the same time divides us. (One key positional difference to recognize and deal with would, they acknowledged, be that two-thirds of the participants at the conference would be living in a conflict zone, the other third, the Italian women themselves, would be living in very different conditions.)

If subjective identity was unpredictable, varied and changing, then self-identity had to be explored, tested and negotiated rather than taken for granted. The ground on which we would find each other and act politically together could only, ultimately, be shared *values*. Thus they wrote ‘Our common starting point, our basic condition to hold a joint seminar, to face and overcome the conflict [in Israel/Palestine] could be to recognize each other not simply ‘as women’ but ‘as women who are for years *committed to finding a fair solution* of the conflict.’ (*DiN* 1991:3).

They brought into play words they describe as ‘among our key words as Italian feminists’: *rooting* and *shifting*, ‘that is the idea that each of us brings with her the rooting in her own memberships and identity but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different memberships and identity.’ These words, they said, were also being used in the multi-ethnic feminisms of the US. Could they be used in this joint seminar? Crucially this concept already evolved before the meeting and it was to be applied in the methodology of the conference itself: the subjective, self-awareness, experience, the personal would be stressed and valued (this was not to be an academic affair); but at the same time theory would be in play, being used and made. Both theoretical knowledge and subjective consciousness would be in play.

Raffaella, Elisabetta and other women planning the conference were not yet using the term *politica trasversale*. But you can see it foreshadowed here. This conference was important for leading to a clearer understanding of the *terrible difficulty* of crossing borders and talking to each other, through, by means of and in spite of differences of identity and positionality – on the basis of shared values we cannot at the outset be sure to find. Or is it that, in looking for such values, we actually make them? They wrote ‘*what we have in common are the instruments that we ourselves are finding to cross boundaries, both real and metaphoric ones*’ (*DiN* 1992:13).

It was moving for me to do the archaeology involved here, digging up the seeds of ideas that, translated and amplified by Nira and others, would guide my own work from 1995 onwards.

### *Nationalism and national identities*

Because I'd recently uncovered rather strong differences of opinion on this question, in Spain, Serbia and elsewhere, I asked quite a few of the women specifically: *do you see antinationalism as a fundamental principle uniting women in Women in Black?*<sup>6</sup>

The answers were cautious. Several answered something to the effect of 'I'd rather not identify as an Italian woman but as a citizen of the world. If only...!' The 'I'd rather not' spoke of their understanding that intrinsic to the notion of 'nation' is the defence of territory, 'border control and the readiness to warfare' (DiN 1993:9). Whereas the 'if only' spoke of their awareness of the very different positionalities of Italian women living in Italy and women living elsewhere in situations of unresolved injustice and conflict. So Diana said for instance 'when we speak of nationalism, that's a hard discussion! Palestinian women, for instance - we can't refuse them their 'nation'.'

Exploring our relationship to nationalism, in any depth, means addressing identity - in exactly the terms we've discussed above. And it means holding in tension contradictory ideas: 'nation' is a belief, a construct we know to be capable of very destructive and alienating interpretation; and, despite that, we may sometimes feel we need such an idea to secure our survival.

### *Pacifism, non-violence and necessary violence*

Some of the Torino women spoke of themselves as 'pacifists'. For example Patrizia said casually, referring to the early days when the *Casa delle Donne* was founded, 'I wasn't a pacifist then.' And the Elisabetta said 'Some of us would like to be pacifists. Some have more problems. Without weapons in some places you can't survive or solve problems.'

So nonviolence and in particular non-violent resistance to oppression and aggression is an open issue for them and had began to be discussed at some length in a re-evaluation of their past. Like the Spanish women, they had been painfully rethinking their solidarity with (violent) liberation movements in various parts of the world in the 1970s. Patrizia observed that 'we don't anymore speak of 'liberation'.' But they had also been revisiting the history of the Italian 'partisans', those who had taken up arms against German Nazism and Italian fascism in World War II. They'd re-explored women's role on both sides in the war. They'd looked to forgotten examples of civil, non-violent resistance. Elisabetta noted 'To all of us it's very important to be aware that those women and men in the end gave up their weapons and tried to assert the principal that war is not the way to do international relations'.

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<sup>6</sup> After all, some authors have seen the birth of Italy in the mid-19th century *risorgimento* as a rather rare kind of nationalism in which women were active and which was positive for women (Kaplan 1997).

So, in a sense, in the same way that these women were looking for shared values that could provide both the methodology and the substance of negotiations between women across *contemporary* differences of identity and positionality, they had been carrying out similar manoeuvres with regard to their relationship to women *in the past*.

*Women's opposition to militarism and war: what are we thinking about patriarchy?*

Another question I'd brought to Torino was 'What conceptual connection do we make between patriarchy and war?' Followed by the rider 'And how explicit is your feminist analysis in your public practice?'

The women I met and interviewed spoke easily of themselves as feminists, part of a long feminist tradition. Italy had an impressive women's movement in the mid-70s. Observing it from England what we had admired most was the strong statement of 'women's difference' made by women in the trade unions and left movements (who elsewhere were often limited to liberal and emancipationist demands) (Threlfall 1996).

In the mid-1980s revival of the movement, which with the decline of the left had by now moved on to the ground of cultural feminism, the theme of 'difference' sometimes became essentialist. Now in the anti-war movement, Elisabetta said, 'We've moved away from sexual difference to a less essentialist gender approach.' Thus few women in Women in Black would say that women are naturally non-violent, men naturally violent. And rather than being 'against' men, they would look to transform gender relations, seeking 'how we might change from being passive subaltern women to having mutual relationships with men' as Elisabetta put it. This in no way invalidated a women-only project. Diana said 'we share with men a project of transformation, but we look at the world with different eyes. I want to reflect *with other women* on the instruments of change.'

Just as they felt at home with the word *feminism*, the women unproblematically used the word *patriarchy*. When I asked 'what connection do you see between patriarchy and war?', Elisabetta answered, 'The connection is there in a reading of history. Patriarchy has always been perpetrated through domination of 'others', particularly women. So historically women have inherited an identity built in a relation of subordination to the male Other.' And Anna said 'the essence of refusing war and giving space to difference is precisely the essence of feminism'.

At a certain moment Margherita said to me 'Sometimes when I'm desperate I think of Mussolini. If we don't resist the fascist mentality we could go back there again.' She confirmed that she sees fascism as the epicentre of patriarchy, militarism and nationalism. But she said 'Patriarchy is a strange idea to people and it needs explaining.' If *Donne in Nero* speak too much about male violence in peace and war they risk being seen as essentialist, so

'we would rather say what we're for than what we're against. And we don't use feminist language in the abstract.'

There is, I think, the same necessary self-censorship here that I've found in other countries. 'We talk about problems, not abstractions or stereotypes.', Margherita said. 'We refuse 'isms'' But, I checked 'You speak of capitalism, militarism and nationalism?' 'Yes.' 'But you don't use the words socialism or feminism?' 'No.' the feminism of the 1970s in which these women were 'born', generated a deep and full understanding of women's oppression. Today, they are trying to apply that understanding to the new problematic of militarism and war. But they are having to do so in the context of a powerful backlash against feminism. When feminism is widely seen as 'strange, even repulsive', they can't feel confident that the younger women supporters of *DiN* in Torino, let alone other young women in the city, can be comfortable to identify themselves as feminists.

### **Acknowledgements and contacts:**

I would like to thank very very warmly the eight women of the *Donne in Nero della Casa delle Donne di Torino* who welcomed me, made time for me and gave me the benefit of their thoughts in the two days I spent in Torino in May 2005. They are Ada Cinato, Anna Valente, Diana Carminati, Elisabetta Donini, Giulia Daniele, Margherita Granero, Patrizia Celotto, Filomena Filippis and Valeria Sangiorgi. And I'd especially like to thank Elisabetta for having me to stay with her, for fixing up our meetings and for the long conversations we had.

I sent this profile in draft to them all the women I interviewed in Torino for comment and correction. Once we had arrived at a version of the paper with which they felt comfortable, they agreed that it should be put on my website for women in other countries to enjoy and discuss.

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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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## **Women In Black In Verona**

During my two days' stay in Verona in May 2005, I first had a supper meeting with several of the women of this *Donne in Nero* group. Around the table were: Anna Cipriani, Annamaria Romito Pacini, Mariarosa Guandalini, Rosanna Restivo-Alessi, Vanna Zamuner, Vilma Martini and Yifat (Taffy) Levav. The next morning Maria Rosa drove me to Taffy's home among the vineyards of nearby Soave, and I had a long combined interview with the two of them. I had had prior contact with Giannina Dal Bosco, an experienced and active member of the group, but unfortunately she was away while I was there. Other group members whose names kept entering our conversation, and I was sorry to miss, were Umberta Biasioli, Alberta Marin and Emma Dall'Oca.

### ***Donne in Nero* in Verona: the group and its praxis**

The core group here in Verona is a minimum of seven women, a maximum of fifteen. Most characteristically they are in their 50s and 60s. They hold organizing meetings on an irregular basis in the home of one or other of them to respond to political changes, plan their vigils and to discuss their activities in relation to other initiatives going on in Verona and elsewhere. Mariarosa passes around information that comes to her from the international WiB network, contacting members by e-mail or phone. Or both. 'Often,' she says, resignedly, 'I phone them to remind them to read their e-mail!'

The most important purpose of the group is the weekly vigil held every Wednesday in a central location, the spacious Piazza Bra. They stand silently, wearing black, in a line along the pavement. They have a long black banner reading *Donne in Nero contro la Guerra*. They individually hold some placards, but others they set out at their feet in a mosaic of colourful handwritten posters, saying who they are, why they're there and highlighting a variety of themes.

This array of posters varies from week to week, some added, some discarded. When I was there there one read 'No bombs, no suicide bombs'; another giving the cost of the war in Iraq, in euros; a third described the purpose of the vigil in English, for tourists. Sometimes a poster may feature a particular woman in some war zone, killed, imprisoned or – as in the case of Giuliana Sgrena – taken hostage. Laying the posters on the ground like this, rather than holding them (at least in the summer when it isn't likely to rain), has the advantage that number of posters doesn't have to be limited to the

number of vigilliers. Also I noticed that passers-by would stand and read the detail quite intently in a way they might feel embarrassed to do if the placard were across someone's chest! And they're colourful and attract attention as a contrast with the black of the remainder of the vigil.

I asked whether the group had any funding. They collect money in a variety of different ways for women in war zones. But I was interested to know that besides this they've long had a system of voluntary 'self taxation' whereby each member commits herself to contribute €10 a month. Their contact with women in Palestine and the former Yugoslav countries had shown them that what women most need is reliable and regular help. Mariarosa said

The essence of being a women's group is that we understand what women need. We learned that they need to be able to rely on continuous and constant support. The chaos that war causes, the loss of control, we understood this. And thinking this we asked ourselves how could we share their burden?

Taffy added

If they ask for a regular remittance of money from us, a taxed sum, not occasional lumps, we felt that's what we should do. As a woman the important thing is stability. We have responsibility for children. So it's quite understandable that they wish for this consistency. As a woman anywhere in the world you can understand that.

Several things are special about this group - and I grasped these features partly by listening to Yifat / Taffy, who, being a relative newcomer and an Israeli, could see them with particular clarity. The women are, she pointed out, although several of them are teachers, mainly working class. 'I've been stunned by them,' she said. 'They're an exceptional group. Not all university educated - such highly intelligent women, who speak a very beautiful Italian!'

Another thing she'd quickly understood is that some of the members of *DiN* are associated with one or another Christian group with a tendency towards liberation theology. In her church the priests are workers like everyone else, part of the community. Yifat, herself a non-religious Sephardi Jew, was curious about the faith-based character of the group when she first met them. 'But religion doesn't take over or dominate,' she said. 'Their religion isn't really to do with a church, they don't except church authority. It's something personal and spiritual.'

Yifat and her partner left Israel five years ago, unable any longer to tolerate the politics, the militarism, the Occupation. She'd first come across the vigil as she walked one day through the Piazza with a baby in a pram and a dog on a lead. She joined them two years later when she bumped into Mariarosa again.

## Allies and networks

In Verona, Women in Black's main allies, the groups with which they have overlapping membership, are mainly concerned with human rights, racism and working with immigrants. *Cesar Kappa* is one - an antifascist group opposing the local right wing. There is an Amnesty International group, too.

Women's groups include the *Circolo della Rosa* which they described as being of a more elite and centre-left milieu, concerned with artistic and cultural activities. A wellknown group of women academic philosophers in the University, calling themselves '*Diotima*', do theoretical work around 'difference'. And there's a lesbian group that meets in the gay meeting place - the Pink Centre.

On the anti-war front, there is a local group of the *Associazione per la Pace*, certain religious groups active for peace, and a small radical left group called *Attack*. They do all meet up however, and are joined by *Donne in Nero*, when mass demonstrations are called for, as in 2002 and 3 in the attempt to prevent the invasion of Iraq.

The *DiN* group feel however that they have a certain significance in the Verona scene simply by virtue of their longevity. They came into existence in 1990 and have remained a constant and reliable feature in the city ever since. Rosanna said '*DiN* has existed here a really long time. The others only get active when there are emergencies, they come up and then die out.

Of course *DiN* Verona's closest allies could be said to be the *Donne in Nero* groups in nearby northern cities, especially Padova, Torino and Udine - also Bologna a bit further south. They worked closely with these neighbours in planning and staging the WiB international encounter in 2003, when 400 WiB women from many countries came to Marina di Massa.

They also feel themselves to be an intrinsic part of the extensive network of Women in Black groups in Italy - forty-six at the last count. National organization of the network, however, is sketchy. The group in Rome, numerically the strongest, has to some extent played a focal role in terms of transmitting information by e-mail. Today communication is good, thanks to the voluntary effort of individuals.

There is actually some disagreement as to how organized the Italian *DiN* network ideally should be. Some would like to see more connectedness, even though local groups must retain their autonomy. They are currently discussing whether to have a website, for instance, and whether to pay someone to manage it. Some women would like *Donne in Nero* to become a formal organization. The feeling about this in Verona is negative. They would like *Donne in Nero* to be more effective and influential, yes, and that probably means better communication. But if this loose network of rather distinctive local groups registers itself as a formal organization and acquires a constitution, committees and elected officers, it will no longer serve, they feel, the valuable purpose it does today.

Maria Rosa said 'When a group gets organized it may be the very moment you lose the will to act... It's not been proved that organized groups do more by virtue of being organized, or produce better results'. And Yifat added, 'I want Women In Black to be something you can run home to. A place of personal relationships. You'd lose if it became an effective international organization.'

### **Activities of Women in Black Verona**

#### *In connection with Israel and Palestine*

'It was really Giannina who started the whole *Donne in Nero* thing here in Verona,' Mariarosa told me, 'and she has a passion for Palestine. She'd already been to Israel and met the Women in Black in Jerusalem before we got going here in Verona in 1990.' Giannina and Biancarosa (a former member of the Verona group) had travelled with Women Visiting Difficult Places (*Visitare Luoghi Difficile*), an initiative I describe at greater length in the Torino profile. So it was natural that the emerging *DiN* group that started vigilling in Verona in 1990 developed this connection.

One thing they did was to participate in the project '*Salaam: The Children of the Olive Branch*', which arranged for Italian groups to 'adopt' a child in Palestine, writing letters to her and sending money to her family. (Later they would decide to stop financing individual families and instead sponsor a community.) They were in touch, of course, with Women in Black in Israel and with *Bat Shalom*, whose Palestinian partner in the Jerusalem Link is the Jerusalem Centre for Women in East Jerusalem. But it has always been difficult, they affirm, especially since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, to identify and contact Palestinian women's organizations. 'There are curfews. Even they can't meet each other. Groups can scarcely exist since the intifada.' Consequently, recently, their main involvement in Palestine has been through the (mixed-sex) International Solidarity Movement in the West Bank. Giannina and Alberta fly out there at least once a year, others of the group less frequently.

Over the years, *DiN* Verona have carried out many activities in support of peace between Jews and Palestinians. For example they were involved in mounting a poetry reading of Israeli and Palestinian poetry in Verona a few years ago to support *Ta'ayush*, a nonviolent Arab-Israeli partnership. In this they worked with other groups of Italians, men and women, addressing this issue. 'It's difficult to say who initiates what -- we all jump in.' Since the Israelis started constructing their 'security' wall to affect total isolation from Israel of the population of the West Bank, Verona groups, including *DiN*, build and destroy a symbolic cardboard wall in the Piazza on June 8<sup>th</sup>.

The activities of the group around the conflict between Israel and Palestine are particularly meaningful for Yifat, a Sephardi Jew from Israel. Arriving in Italy a few years ago, she got involved in a lot of activities around Israel and

Palestine in and near Verona. But there's something about Women in Black she finds matches her politics especially well. She explained it like this.

Women have a strong capacity to find out what other women need. The Israeli left have *patronised* Palestinians. 'They'll have to do this, we'll help them.' And then they're puzzled why the Palestinians don't accept the advice from us people who know better! It's the same relationship men have to women in some ways. I understood in Israel that this approach is wrong. We have to *listen* to them, that's what we have to do.

In Italy, left demonstrations are the same. They shout for '*Palestina libera, Palestina rossa*' – in other words, 'A free Palestine and a red Palestine'! That makes me very angry! These Left factions will help Palestinians to their obtained their right to - what? 'A Communist state!' I would even say is problematic to specify a 'democratic' Palestinian state. It's *they* who must decide what kind of a society they want.

The left in Israel is changing, but it's always been 'We'll help you if... if it's democratic, if it's left, if you undertake to control terror!' You can't work for peace with an 'if' like that, provisionally.

#### *In connection with the former Yugoslavia*

Italy had a common border with the former-Yugoslavia. So when the neighbouring state began to fall apart and war was on the horizon, to this group in northern Italy it felt as if 'this is a heavy responsibility for European countries'. In 1991 some of the women of *DiN* Verona, including Giannina, Mariarosa, Umberta, Alberta and Biancarosa, joined a peace caravan of European women and men led by a Green organization, which travelled through Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade to Sarajevo. Hostilities were just then beginning in Bosnia.

Mariarosa told me how in Belgrade they met Stasa Zajovic and others – including Lepa Mladjenovic and Neda Bozinovic - that were coming together as women to resist the impending war. 'They greeted us and hugged us warmly. Nobody knew how to react at that time, how to be ready for the war that was coming.' The Italian women had brought with them their banner, saying *Donne in Nero per la Pace*. And this was the moment when the group in Belgrade would take the name Women In Black Against War, *Zene u crnom protiv rata*, which with hindsight one can see as a development that would broaden the focus of WiB from Israel / Palestine into international movement addressing war itself.

Back in Italy, collecting the regular monthly 'dues' of €10, the women sent the proceeds mainly to women in the former-Yugoslavia. The *DiN* group in Venice which had also been represented on the caravan, subsequently organized a meeting in Mestre, a bridge-building move to enable women from the former

Yugoslav regions to meet each other. In 1993 Giannina, Biancarosa and Rosanna joined *Mir Strada* (Peace Now) an international non-violent mass action (organized by Italian *Beati Costruttori di Pace* and French *Equilibre*) in which a thousand men and women went to Bosnia (2-14 August) with the aims of

- interrupting the war at least for a few days;
- lending solidarity to all human beings suffering from the war – regardless of their ideology, gender, religion or ethnical origin;
- calling for the renewal of respect for human rights;
- and starting a kind of popular diplomacy, based on non-violence and international human rights.

Later, members of *DiN* Verona would make many other visits to the region, attending several of the annual encounters organized by the Belgrade women at Novi Sad. Immediately after the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Mariarosa, Giannina and Umberta went to meet Bosnian women in Sarajevo. Close friendships have evolved from this movement of solidarity and support.

### **Their philosophy**

When I put to them that the Women in Black network seem to me to have two basic principles -- building bridges to and between other women and taking responsibility for monitoring and contesting one's own government and state -- they agreed with this. Clearly their work with Israel/Palestine and the Balkan countries are examples of the former. But they told me also how they have addressed their actions against all the wars as they came along in the '90s -- the Gulf War, the NATO bombing of Belgrade, the US bombardment of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. When Italian governments started their involvement in successive NATO interventions and the US-led coalition in the war against 'terror', *DiN*'s alienation from the state increased.

Rosanna pointed out that they're not just against the government but '*contro la guerra*' - against war in general. On the other hand, it's too easy, in a way, to oppose war in the abstract. She said

it becomes personal when it's your government. For instance when you see the Italian government sending aircraft to the Gulf, in total contradiction of the Italian constitution. That 'my' government violated the constitution! From that moment I was able, in theory, to become a "traitor" to my country . I want it to be clear that I refuse foreign policy of my country, based on bombs and military forces: it is NOT IN MY NAME.

Their strategy in dealing with war and militarism here at home has been, first and foremost, the vigil, trying to influence popular opinion by addressing individual passers-by one by one. They feel that silence is a good strategy. Taffy said 'Most men say women talk too much, so seeing women silent for an hour -- that's surprising to people, it's strong and effective. It counteracts the stereotype.' Like a lot of Women In Black groups, I find, they feel a little disappointed in themselves that they don't do more to lobby politicians. But one way I saw them as 'taking responsibility' for war and its effects within their own society was the practical work some of them do, in ally- organizations like *Cesar Kappa*, with migrants experiencing racism in the city. (They say that when people are aggressive against vigil it's most often racists angered by their support for immigrants.)

### *Pacifism and nonviolence*

I found the same thoughtful hesitations among them as exist in WiB elsewhere on the questions of pacifism and non-violence. They firmly believe that, as Rosanna put it, 'war can never achieve peace'. And Taffy said definitely she would see herself as 'theoretically' pacifist. But she simultaneously made it clear she had some sympathy with those who would say 'we can't really dictate a practice of non-violence if we're not directly experiencing a situation -- for example where people are trying to hurt a child. Defending yourself the defending others are different things.'

### *Nationalism*

This kind of awareness in the group of the significance of positionality - differences according to where you live and what you're experiencing - makes for a differentiated view of nationalism too. Some of them are strongly against nationalism; all feel strongly that nationalism is one of the root causes of war. They make strongly antinationalist statements in their posters. But they do understand that some women are still attached to a notion of '*patria*'. 'You've been brought up to it, so you have some internal conflict about it.' It was interesting to me that when Rosanna spoke of 'becoming a traitor to my country', Annamaria added 'yes, but we should distinguish country from government'.

We discussed the question of nation and nationhood in relation to Israel and Palestine. The left as a whole unquestioningly support Palestinian nationalist aspirations for a Palestinian state, usually calling for 'two states for two people'. Mariarosa thinks that the solution is not the creation of a Palestinian State, but the construction of a Israeli-Palestinian community where the rights of Palestinian people are fully respected. But she says 'I know that's idealistic, an outsider view. It's the opinion of a woman living in Italy. Someone living in the conflict itself may well think differently.' Taffy's dream is to start from zero, Jews and Palestinians raising their children together so that neither is 'other' to the other. People commonly argue against this by warning that Palestinians would create a culture disadvantageous to women, and clinching it by saying ' anyway it's unrealistic'. She counters the first by saying 'Jewish

culture is not so hot on human rights either', and the second by arguing that the two state solution is no more 'realistic' than a single state.

One state for two people -- for all people -- is not just the ideal but also the only rational solution. Even if you support the two state solution as a tactic, it just won't work. Palestine won't be a viable state, that's the main point. It's too small and too split geographically.

### *Feminism et cetera*

Finally, we talked about why they're organizing as women, and what that says about their analysis of gender in relation to war. This group, unlike the *DiN* in Torino, don't have individual biographies in the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s. Exceptions would be Giannina who has a long history of feminist and trade unionist activism, and Yifat who comes from Israel where experience showed her, she feels, that women are powerful in their actions against war. But probably others would agree with Mariarosa in seeing gender as implicated in the causes of war. She said 'It's economic interests, economic control and power. All kinds of power -- state and national power -- including masculine power which is implicated in all the structures.'

Whatever their background or analysis, in practical terms they've clearly elected to be a women's group, part of a women's network. Rosanna says she likes organizing among women because 'We don't have to answer to anyone, nobody tells us what to do, nobody is judging us. Besides there are some things that only we know, only women understand. And we know our own limitations as women.' Vanna said, 'A woman is able to listen to others and doesn't impose what she thinks. Men are more dogmatic. Men talk a lot, we like silence'. They have their particular methodology of protest. They prefer poems, for instance, to the aggressive slogans popular with the left. 'Instead of blaming capitalists for war, we'd rather point out the horrors of war.'

So although men, usually husbands and partners, do occasionally drop in on the vigil, they are not involved in the organization. But there are divergent views on their presence. Taffy says, for instance, that in Jerusalem where men often stand carrying Women in Black signs, 'it's great, the men are accepting the role of women'. And Vilma felt comfortable about having men attend the vigil in Piazza Bra.

Men and women are equal and similar. If they join us it's probably because they haven't found other groups they like. If they identify with the purpose of our group and don't detract from its essence, it's OK. They envy us. We've got something that they haven't got.

Mariarosa on the other hand says 'I have a different view. I'm not keen on having men on the vigil because our strong symbolism is really: to be women; in black; and in silence'.

That war and peace are gendered matters, the women certainly agree. A basic tenet seems to be that women and men have different experiences of war. This is the case even if women join the army. 'It *a/ways* different for a woman, even the fighting of war,' Mariarosa said. Their posters speak mainly about the suffering of women in war. As a group however they also have a critique of militarized masculinities and, for example, call for military refusal. They are deeply conscious of the connections between domestic violence in peacetime and sexual violence in war, and are aware that war often leads to increased domestic violence. So although it is not their specific task to address domestic violence, they work with groups who do so.

When it comes to organization and meetings probably most members agree that being women-only has important advantages. We've seen, above, that they feel the special value of *DiN* in the context of the peace movement in Verona resides in the fact that they've kept going for 15 years. Rosanna says that's been possible because

there's an affinity between us as women that keeps us going, the ideals we share. In a women's group it comes naturally, you don't need to prepare. We don't argue continuously; we agree easily. We manage to address each issue as it comes along without difficulty. For example, shall we or shall we not join a particular demonstration? Even if we can't discuss something with the whole group, a few of us can make a decision on the spot and be confident that we'll have agreement from the others. We know we agree on the main issues. We're united by the fundamentals.

### **Acknowledgements and Contacts:**

I'd like to thank the women of *Donne in Nero* in Verona very much indeed for receiving me so graciously, giving me their time and the benefit of their thoughts. Fortunately for me, since I don't speak Italian, some women in this group spoke English -- and Taffy was a valued interpreter between me and those who do not. Thanks Taffy! Sometimes we found a common language in French. So sorry, Giannina, Umberto and others that we failed to meet this time. I hope we shall make it another day. And, Mariarosa, a big thank you to you and your partner, son and daughter for having me to stay and showing me your sublime city!

I sent this profile in draft to them all the women I interviewed in Verona for comment and correction. Once we had arrived at a version of the paper with which they felt comfortable, they agreed that it should be put on my website for women in other countries to enjoy and discuss.

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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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## Women in Black in Padova

Padova was the third stop on my trip to visit Women in Black groups in northern Italy. First we had a meeting at the *Casa della Donna*, where almost all the group were present: Charlotte, Gabriella, Giuliana, Lucia, Manuela, Marianita, Mariella, Mariuccia and Maya (for their full names please refer to 'acknowledgements' on page 9). Later I sat down with Charlotte, Giuliana and Marianita for individual interviews.

There was, it seems, a *Donne in Nero* in Padova in the early '90s, probably sparked off by the Gulf War. But it disintegrated. The present group is entirely different women and they didn't come together until 1999. It was the time of the war in Kosovo. Giuliana had gone along with a couple of other women to the Peace Tent erected in the town centre by the local coalition opposing the NATO bombing. They'd taken with them a banner reading 'women against war'. Marianita saw it. She'd already been to visit Women in Black Belgrade and had attended one of their annual encounters at Novi Sad. So she wondered, 'is this a new *Donne in Nero* in Padova?' But she discovered they knew even less about Women in Black than she did. On the other hand, they realised they needed each other. So here in the Peace Tent in fact was a Women in Black group just about to be born.

At the start there were only three or four of them. One of the first things they did as a group was to join a peace movement demonstration at the United States Air Force Base at Aviano, from which planes were flying to bomb Belgrade and Kosovo. This time they did call themselves 'Women in Black'. Mariuccia remembers buying a black dress for the occasion. 'But it was so hot some women finished up in black bras!' Meeting groups of *DiN* from other Italian cities at these demonstrations, Giuliana was positively impressed by the strong links many of them had build to women in the war zone.

For two years the Padova group was very small, only four or five women. 'But they were important years,' said Marianita. 'We matured together.' New women gradually joined, until they became nine or ten – a group comprised of teachers and former teachers, a doctor, several public sector administrative workers. They began to hold vigils. So long as the Kosovo war continued they were on the street every day, but then dropped to a weekly vigil and then an irregular one, responding to circumstances. A succession of big events, both before and after 2001, forced them out onto the street.

The vigils are held in the late afternoon, at a site in the city centre where they're seen by plenty of people. Like *DiN* Verona, they lay their placards on the ground in front of them. And they always distribute a fresh leaflet focusing on the issue of the moment. The placards and leaflets they describe as 'counter-information'. Thinking about the content is a reason for meeting quite

frequently. *DiN* Padova have no regular source of funding and often chip in personal contributions. But they have applied for and obtained grants from the local administration for particular projects.

Most but not all of the Padova group are on e-mail, and they communicate by phone as well. Marianita is the one at the centre of this network. She is on the international Women in Black mailing list, and several other lists besides, and selects items to transmit to her group. She obtains the Spanish or French-language version of the international WiB list (she doesn't speak English) and translates the more important items into Italian as a service to the whole Women in Black network in Italy. But she says it's quite difficult to know the criteria on which she should select material for onward transmission. 'At times you want to do it all, say it all. But if I pass on too much information, in the end they won't read it.'

It's a very demanding task, and at one time the group tried to organise it in such a way that individual Italian women would each take on to purvey news from one particular region -- for example Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Colombia or Israel. But it didn't work, and now Marianita translates items from Yugoslavia and Colombia, and other Italian women see to the other items. Putting news up on a website for individuals to access as and when they choose might be a more intelligent way to make information available. But Giuliana said 'Maybe the rather old average age of Women in Black is a disadvantage in this respect. For the young it's more natural to use the Web. For myself, I have to think twice before I do.' Nonetheless she felt that improving communication and cooperation between the many Italian *DiN* groups was vitally important -- so long as it could be done without losing the individuality and variety of local groups. Picking a path between chaos and bureaucracy was not easy.

On the other hand they do work well, quite intensively at times, with the other groups in the north of Italy: Verona, Udine, Schio and Torino. 'We've got a deeper relationship with these northern groups,' Marianita said. 'We meet them occasionally to exchange experience and take initiatives. It's been very positive. But the wider the area, the more difficult it is to do.'

## **Activities and connections**

### *Israel / Palestine*

Outside Italy, this group has been more attached to the Women in Black in the former-Yugoslavia than to those in Israel / Palestine. Marianita, Charlotte and other women visited Israel and Palestine together, and Marianita went also as part of the 'rotation' of women organised by Luisa Morgantini in 2001 (see my profile of *DiN* Torino). They invited Israeli and Palestinian women to speak in Padova.

It's quite difficult in Italy, they say, to put across the idea of supporting peace-seeking people on both sides in a conflict, and specifically, as Women in Black do, supporting dialogue between them. Solidarity with (only)

Palestinians is the theme of the left. It is the *Associazione per la Pace*, with the *DiN* and other pacifist groups, who work for dialogue between the two Marianita explained. On the other hand successive Italian governments have supported Israel. Even a centre-left leader made an official visit to Sharon. 'The left were criticising him for going. But we said OK - go! What matters is what you say when you're there. Go and challenge them on their violations of human rights.' *Donne in Nero* are different in acknowledging and supporting *both* Israeli peace activists and a non-violent resistance in Palestine.

### *The Former Yugoslavia*

But Padova *DiN* don't have the enriching personal connections in Israel and Palestine that they've developed in the former Yugoslav countries. Belgrade is nearer to the north Italian cities, and the women there speak many languages. For a lot of Italians the neighbouring country had been a place for tourism. Marianita said

I often went there on holiday before the war. I felt that their form of socialism was very different from other East European countries. Although the regime was repressive to its opposition, all the same for 50 years under Tito there was no bloodshed.

So when Yugoslavia began to disintegrate into war it was an emotional time for her and many other Italian women. They badly wanted to respond to what was happening just across the border. Marianita joined the initiatives of the *Associazione per la Pace* and *Beati i Costruttore di Pace* (Blessed are the Peacemakers). In 1993 she joined the caravan to Yugoslav cities which tried and failed to reach Sarajevo. The same year she went with AFP to Belgrade and met the Women in Black there. She was very impressed by how they were actively opposing war in such a difficult and dangerous situation. She didn't get active with Women in Black at the time -- she was teaching full-time then -- but she kept informed through Giannina and others in nearby Verona and Schio.

Marianita visited Bosnia and for three years had a Bosnian deserter as a guest in her home. In 1997 she went to the international encounter at Novi Sad, and later to a WiB meeting in Brussels. All this made her feel already very involved, some years before their own *DiN* group in Padova would get together. One of the first things they would do as a group was to go in October 1999 to the international encounter the Belgrade women organised at Ulcinj in Montenegro. For many of them close friendships developed with women of the former-Yugoslavia. Padova, Udine and Verona *DiN* groups worked well together, 'specialising' in relations with Belgrade.

### *Addressing the Italian state*

I put to the group in Padova the notion that other women have put to me, that the international network of Women in Black has two main 'pillars' in its mission: on the one hand the building bridges between differently positioned women in times of war, as described above; on the other challenging the

policies of our own governments. Marianita agreed, but felt as a group they had worked more on reaching out to women in conflict zones than they had on addressing Italian policy.

We've not really considered how we're citizens of a state that is making war, that's militarized and producing arms. Only lately we've been getting to think about what our position is, in our own society.

### Local and national allies

The Padova group also do local work in the community. Lucia, a teacher, is particularly committed to work at this grassroots level. With her the *DiN* have taken a lead in bringing Women in Black into schools to do peace education with the children. For example they have arranged meetings at which high school students could hear visiting speakers from RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) and the HAWCA (Humanitarian Movement for Women and Children in Afghanistan).

Among *DiN*'s local allies, then, may be counted some teachers and groups of school students. The *DiN* of Padova meet at the *Casa della Donna* where other women's groups also meet and organize talks and exhibitions. There's a lesbian group in the town called *Drasticamente*. 'We have good relations with them. They invited us to come and speak about *Donne in Nero*. But we don't overlap much.'

When there was a war threat, groups in Padova came together in a local network, the *il Coordinamento Contro la Guerra*.<sup>7</sup> *DiN* collaborate in this alliance, although the working relations within it are very different from those in their own group. Whether to co-operate with other groups or whether to go it alone is quite a live issue here among women in Padova. One of them said, 'We talk about 'building bridges' to women out there. But when it comes to building bridges here to people of different views we're not all that great!'

As far as the the issue of religion is concerned - a women's group of a local parish church invited Women in Black to come and speak to them. Some of the group were not so keen, but others felt it was important to respond. Charlotte said 'I've taken part in *Beati* actions too.' They have no difficulty in collaborating with Catholic pacifists.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a national organization in Italy of women opposing war. Called the *Convenzione Permanente dell Donne contro la Guerra* (Standing Convention of Women against War), it began in 2000 and is a reference point for studies and other initiatives for peace, internationally and in everyday life. Its principle is opposition to the use of war and other kinds of violence as an approach to resolving conflicts whether of gender, ethnicity or between countries. The Convention includes *Donne in Nero*, the *Unione Nazionale di Donne (UDI*, National Union of Women), 'historical' feminist groups and newer formations of young women. It includes women from *Rifondazione*, from the Greens, dissident members of the *Democratici di Sinistra* and the Catholic grassroots. One of its most representative figures at a national level is Lidia Manapace, a longtime feminist and pacifist.

And then there's 'politics'. Just like us in London, they found co-operating with the left over the Social Forum 'brought them to their knees'! Marianita explained,

There are a lot of tensions in the left here. It's to do with the history of politics in the city. So some of us in our group will say, 'It's such hard work to co-operate with them, let's do it alone'. Others feel it's important to keep up relations with others working for peace in the city, to talk on different platforms. They'll say, 'I'll speak anywhere as long as I can speak my mind'. But this isn't unique to Padova - it's a classic divergence that exists everywhere in Italy.

### **Why Women In Black?**

At our meeting I asked the group, 'Do you think of yourselves as feminists?' Mariuccia immediately responded with an emphatic 'Yes!'. But these women vary widely in their individual histories of involvement in, or distance from, the feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s. Manuela, one who has been consistently involved, remarked 'I like that question! It addresses a lot of things we don't talk about. We talk about war and Bush, and we forget other little corners that we really ought to examine!'

She explained that in Padova the feminist movement of the 1970s had been very strong, 'many-sided, with loads of groups and a lot of confrontation.' On 7 April 1979, when the authorities took violent action against the extra-parliamentary Left and the police arrested large numbers of people, even university professors, feminists were among their targets. That repression set back feminist organisation and activism which would not revive until it surfaced, in a different form, in the mid-1980s. But in both phases of the movement there were 'huge difficulties, misunderstandings, problems of communication, open conflict'. Even recently they had encountered difficulty in working with other women here in connection with the World March of Women.

The adherence to Women in Black was, for each member of the group, quite conscious and selective -- this network represented something unique in both the anti-war movement *and* the women's movement. But their criteria varied. Manuela said 'we began to ask ourselves why we wanted to work together as Women in Black. We found we had personal answers, each of us.'

For Manuela herself it had been a specifically feminist choice. 'It's not just because it's easier. I *believe* in working with women.' By focusing on issues that could unite them, women both more and less identified as feminists could work productively together. She believes that war accentuates the patriarchal violence of everyday life, so it was natural to her, having always worked with women, to join women now in organising against this immediate threat of war. 'Women have a different view of the world,' she says.

Mariuccia, looking back to the seventies, said

If I'm acting now against war, it doesn't mean I've abandoned those earlier feminist themes. It's *as a woman* that I am absolutely against wars. Take Iraq. I'm ashamed that I can't tell you how many are dead. I imagine being a mother of children in these last three years in Iraq - I ask myself what sort of life they have lived!

Lucia felt it was important to differentiate *Donne in Nero* from 'radical feminism' with its 'sharp lines'. Today she felt things were more fluid. 'At root we have things in common'. She had been involved in consciousness-raising groups, doing readings and discussions on the theme of violence against women and by women, and the relationship of gender violence to war. She'd been asking herself whether women 'are carriers of a different culture'. She feels 'militarism is an expression of a patriarchal society. We have to change society at its roots. Militarism can't be fought only by proclaiming 'No to War'. First of all we have to change minds', and that's what *DiN* seemed to be about.

For Marianita it was the issue of violence and nonviolence that had made her consider herself a feminist. 'I can't manage to separate feminism from pacifism. She said: It's being a woman that leads me to do something against militarism and violence.' Both Marianita and Giuliana were attracted by the fact that *DiN* didn't get immobilized by theoretical debates, but facilitated action. Giuliana, with a history first in the left and then in the feminist movement, had come to feel profound impatience with any analysis divorced from practice. In *Women in Black* she'd found both together. And Marianita said something similar.

As I'm ignorant about feminism, I try to read what feminists are writing. Sometimes it's lovely. But there is no outcome. Whereas in *DiN*, there may be contradictions, yes, but there is also a practice and that's what's important to me.

For some of its members what was most important about *Donne in Nero* was that they didn't position themselves 'against' one or other side in war, as do (we saw above) both the Italian state and its left opposition. Charlotte had only recently been drawn into feminist activism by her daughter, who had prompted her to visit Israel/Palestine and the former Yugoslavia. Now, at 60, she found her ideas clarifying. And she liked *Women in Black* particularly because 'I need very much to understand both sides of a question. For instance, I like it that we support pacifist groups both in Israel and Palestine. I like that kind of tolerance.'

Several of the women said that what attracted them to *Women in Black* was its particular way of relating and working - the group *process*. Marianita was drawn towards *Donne in Nero* because 'I found they were women I could work with. It was the way they had of working, of making decisions. It was very very different. At the start we scarcely knew each other, yet there was a willingness to co-operate - in practical action, against war'.

Giuliana too had liked the process she first saw at one of the international encounters hosted by the Belgrade Women In Black -- for instance the absence of 'leaders', and the listening, the inclusive group work. She's impressed by how, in contrast to those earlier manifestations of feminism, in *Donne in Nero* they know how to deal with the conflicts that arise. For example, concerning the invasion of Iraq, one of them might give priority to opposing Italian state policy in a similar way to the extra-parliamentary left, while another would prioritize campaigning on the effects of the war on Iraqi women. 'In other groups such a difference would create a violent rift, whereas we manage to stay together.'

### **Pacifism, nationalism and patriotism**

A question in my head when I came to Italy was how women resolve certain contradictions around two concepts -- on the one hand 'pacifism' and on the other 'nationalism'.

At our meeting around the table in the Casa della Donna, I asked 'do you think of yourselves as pacifists?' Mariella said, 'I'm not a pacifist, or even pacific! I'm just against war and violence.' But I pressed her on this - for instance how does she position herself on the violence of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa intifada? 'With great discomfort!' she answered. 'I find that very difficult, quite distressing. But I'm convinced that in this year of 2005, the military approach, armed conflict, is bound to fail.' You mean, I asked, we can't reach peace through war? 'More than that,' she said, 'it's positively self-destructive.'

So for Mariella it wasn't just an ethical question, but a pragmatic one. It wasn't just wrong to use force, it was counter-productive. Several other women saw a choice between nonviolence and necessary violence as contingent -- it depended on circumstances. Manuela said

From my personal history, I'd be a pacifist. But it's too easy to say that, when you're not in a war yourself. I don't know what I would do in other circumstances. My country is making war. The only thing I can do is something against my own country. It's very different when you're considering countries that are *in* war. I would like us to think more about it.

Some of them were aware their ideas on this had changed over time. Like others on the left, in the 1970s Marianita had been actively involved in solidarity movements supporting liberation struggles -- for example in Nicaragua. 'There was no question in my mind then of non-violence. I supported the Sandinista armed resistance against the Contras.' Now here she was in a movement not only for justice, but for *peace* and justice.

For Lucia the absence of overt violence didn't mean peace. She referred to 'structural violence' -- the violence that's institutionalised and present in our lives in the shape of inequality and exclusion.

Pacifism means saying no to war, no to the use of violence. But there's another way of seeing non-violence, and that's working for economic justice, a different kind of development -- sustainable, respectful. I feel that very much as a teacher.

Italy today is ruled by a right-wing party, led by Silvio Berlusconi, with an explicitly nationalist name: *Forza Italia*. *Donna in Nero* oppose many of its foreign and domestic policies. But there are other elements, well to the right of *Forza Italia*. Giuliana explained

Until a few years ago there was no strong nationalism in Italy, at least not since World War II. But in the last few years a widespread movement has begun again, to build unity around the flag. They're trying to create, to make a myth of the flag. This nationalism has two aspects: one is fascist, the *Alleanza Nazionale*, and the other is the *Lega Nord*.

However, the nationalism of the *Lega Nord*, the Northern League, is contradictory. It's not Italian nationalism -- because it opposes Rome. Those who oppose the *Lega* include those who value Italy as the nation it is. Lucia's view reflected some of this complexity.

If nationalism is a search for your deeper roots, for things which unify us, I would support that. Because I feel in Italy, as in Yugoslavia and also in Spain, there's a tendency that wishes to split the country into *sub-national* identities. This threatens disintegration and could even lead to war, as it did in Yugoslavia. In Italy the separation and rivalry is between north and south. We need to find a national identity to unify us, if we want to prevent an internal war. Besides, if we don't, it could lead us to be confident and unafraid. The more secure your identity the less fear you have of the 'other'.

One way fear of the 'other' expresses itself of course is in racism. Padova is by no means the worst city in this respect, despite having a large immigrant population. But the paranoia of the post-September-11 war on 'terror' had changed the atmosphere in Italy. Tighter immigration laws had had a racist effect. The mass media was now controlled by the right, and racism had gained legitimacy. People who were once inhibited to speak their views out loud now feel free to be as racist as they like.

Another contradiction the women had been facing was that which exists between the politics of the left in Italy and the politics articulated by Women in Black allies in a war zone. Marianita had been impressed by the

'antipatriotism' of the Serbian women, during the war in Kosovo. It had made her regret her own lack of reflection.

In Italy, even in Women in Black, there was not always much comprehension about the position the women in Belgrade were taking. Because we simply saw NATO as the enemy, bombing Belgrade and Kosovo, we supposed that was the way they saw it too.

Some *DiN* had not at first been alert to the Serbian group's simultaneous opposition to Milosevic - which of course they had been sustaining since the very start of the wars in Yugoslavia eight years before. Giuliana said there had therefore been conflict in Italy at that time, with the left, including some women, limiting their opposition to NATO alone while *Donne in Nero*, as they attuned themselves to what the Belgrade women were saying, stepped out of line to condemn Milosevic's nationalist aggression against the Albanians and other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia. While some groups of the left readily accepted the presence of Serb *cetniks* on their demonstrations, *DiN* challenged these nationalists and said 'Put those flags away – they're not a sign of peace!'

This reminded me very much of the discomfort London Women in Black experienced at this time, and which we wrote about in the article 'For a politics of neither/nor'.<sup>8</sup> It seems to be a perennial divergence between a left opposition to war and a feminist / pacifist opposition to war. The former says 'my enemy's enemy must be my friend' while the latter says 'not necessarily so'.

### **Acknowledgments and contacts:**

I'd like to thank very warmly the women of *Donne in Nero* in Padova for welcoming me to their city and their group, and for giving up their time to tell me their story and share their ideas. The following are those I had a chance to interview, either collectively or individually: Charlotte H. Browne, Gabriella Rossi, Giuliana Ortolan, Lucia Tomasoni, Manuela Carlon, Marianita De Ambrogio, Mariella Genovese, Mariuccia Giuliani and Maya Giugni. I appreciated each one of them so much -- and especially the hospitality of Charlotte, who had me to stay in her apartment and also did a lot of language interpretation for me.

I sent this profile in draft to all those I interviewed in Padova for comment and correction. Once we had arrived at a version of the paper with which they felt comfortable, they agreed that it should be put on my website for women in other countries to enjoy and discuss.

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<sup>8</sup> Accessible on [www.cynthiacockburn.org](http://www.cynthiacockburn.org)

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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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6 September 2005

## Women in Black in Bologna

### *Donne in Nero*

In silenzio ed in nero  
nelle piazze del mondo  
per dire No alla guerra  
donne  
in silenzio ed in lutto  
come si usa in questa terra  
attorno al Mare Nostrum

fuori l'assenza di colore  
Dentro l'assunzione totale del dolore  
perché  
le donne lo sanno bene che  
le ferite straziano la carne  
anche nel campo avverso  
e il sangue del nemico  
ha lo stesso colore

questo hanno detto  
nella piazza centrale  
le donne di Israele

in silenzio ed in lutto  
hanno teso la mano alle sorelle  
- quelle del campo avverso –  
insieme  
per dire NO alla guerra

*Anna Zoli, Bologna*

My travels among *Donne in Nero* groups in northern Italy ended with two days in Bologna where, first, I had a long afternoon's conversation with Anna Zoli, Lorenzina Pagella and Piera Stefanini, in the huge echoing hall of the *Centro di Documentazione delle Donne* (Women's Documentation Centre), it's windows overlooking the Piazza Maggiore. Later I was able to interview individually Chiara Gattullo, Gabriella Cappelletti and Patricia Tough.

### **The group and its organization**

This group hold vigils about twice a month on a Wednesday between 6 and 7 p.m. They stand in the Piazza Maggiore, a stone's throw from their meeting place in the Documentation Centre. Typically there are between eight and ten women present, but there may be as many as twenty when there is something urgent in the news. It's a busy corner where they are seen by a lot of local pedestrians, and tourists too. They wear black and aspire to silence -- although they don't achieve this as well as they'd like. The main and the oldest message of the vigil is on a banner which reads *Bandiamo il Militarismo*

dalle Nostre Vite ('Let ban militarism from our lives'). On some of their badges and placards they say *Fuori la Guerra dalla Storia* ('get war out of history').

They spread placards on the pavement at their feet, and actively leaflet the passers-by. The leaflet is frequently updated to reflect changes in political circumstances. In whatever war or threat of war they are addressing, they emphasize the experience of women and express women's usually marginalized point of view. Lorenzina said, 'For us it's very very important to write and rewrite the leaflet, based on discussions between us. We give a lot of importance to reflecting on events.' For example they took up the issue of the exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The leaflet for this was produced in a three-hour discussion in which they tried to understand the implication of the women soldiers photographed among the men abusing their prisoners. So renewing the leaflet is one reason for the group to be sure they get together at least a couple of times a month, and have longer meetings about every three months.

I asked Chiara what effect she thought they had through the vigil. She said

What we achieve through vigilling probably depends on the external situation and what we're saying about it. I don't think the vigil is about changing government policies, really. We can put pressure on the government more effectively by working with other women's and mixed groups in the peace movement generally. I think the people who come to us mostly agree with us and if they don't, we probably don't change their minds. But it's a good chance for me to meet people who don't agree with me. I don't try to convince anyone, but I hope they will stop and think for themselves: 'there's a war!' I explain what we're doing and what we think. Sometimes we may ask them to sign a petition.

But for Chiara political practice isn't, in any case, limited to the vigil. For a while, just after the war, she was manager of a project for inclusive education in Kosovo. Back here in Bologna now she works among blind and partially-sighted students at the University, to help them in their activities through new technology. And she says 'I don't abandon *DiN* when I go to work. I talk about it. I live it. In my life as a whole I am *DiN*, discussing the issues with people is part of the work'. (In this way, Chiara made me think, perhaps we can see the vigil process as partly for ourselves, helping us to pay attention, renewing a personal commitment that we act on elsewhere.)

As to the composition of the group, it's women only - not just the organization but as a vigil too. Men don't stand with them, as happens in some vigils - but husbands and partners are supportive. The majority of the group are heterosexual, with a lesbian minority -- but the politics of sexuality is 'not particularly visible' among the themes of their collective activism. As to occupation, several are teachers, some work in the public service. One is a railway train driver. There's a student, a psychotherapist, a tax accountant and several retired women. A recent welcome addition has been a graphic designer who has developed the group's image, with stickers, and bags for sale.

In terms of age, two-thirds of the core group are between 50 and 70 - with a few younger women. *DiN* in Bologna put quite a lot of thought into how to attract and hold the new generation, those in their 20s. Lorenzina mentioned two young women of nomadic disposition who had dropped in on the vigil for a while and asked interested questions about feminism, especially in relation to Israel and Palestine. They felt such a group as *Donne in Nero* must surely be feminist, and they expressed uneasiness about this -- they felt that friends of their age would be afraid of feminism 'as if it's the devil'. Piera said, 'We try to attract younger women by organizing special meetings. But our methodology perhaps doesn't suit them. We don't, or can't, make space for their subjectivity.'

*DiN* Bologna has no secure funding. They contribute individually. They sell those bags and other products for a small revenue. And they have received support from the regional council for specific projects – for instance air fares for women to and from conflict zones. Coordination is a recognised role in this group -- and Patricia is currently the acknowledged coordinator, maintaining an e-mail list of around 20 women. She also ensures that the vigil takes place, calls meetings, distributes jobs and chases up on commitments. She and Anna Draghetti, whom I did not meet, are the Bologna contact persons in relation to the Women In Black Italian national network.

## Activities

### *At the start*

The women now involved in *DiN* Bologna came to it from different directions. Gabriella had already been involved with Raffaella Lamberti, Elisabetta Donini, Alessandra Mecozzi, Chiara Ingrao and other women in *Visitare Luoghi Difficili* (see my Profile of Torino). It was the '*Non Ci Basta Dire Basta*' moment. She had been touched by Elisabetta's letter to *Il Manifesto*, in which she had written, 'We want to say we are not complicit. We speak from feelings, we don't want just to do solidarity. We have understood that we share the same destiny as other women.' Gabriella was terribly moved by the attack on the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. She says now

I wasn't really involved in war and peace politics before Sabra and Shatila. Probably my earliest thoughts on those things would have been as a little girl, seeing an exhibition of photographs of concentration camps. They changed my life. I'd never met Jews, but just seeing those photographs, I got such a deep sense of the injustice of the Shoa. So now, almost 30 years later, I couldn't believe what Israel was doing to the Palestinians.

Gabriella was one of the authors of the book, *Donne a Gerusalemme*, that resulted from their first visit to Palestine and Israel in 1988, soon after the start of Women in Black in Jerusalem. A phrase from that book expresses very clearly the *politica trasversale* (see Torino profile) they were trying to bring

into being. 'We cannot consider... conflicts to be solved when one side imposes itself by force on the other, only when the diversity of histories, cultures, experience, of projects are reciprocally recognised and coexist.' On return from Jerusalem, Gabriella says, 'We made ourselves a promise that we would set up Women in Black groups all over Italy, with that same problematic. We would go to different cities and speak'.

Others of the contemporary *DiN* group had met each other in 1991, at the time of the Gulf War. They were in a mixed group that included women of the *Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa* (Cooperative Education Movement), with which Piera Stefanini was involved. Some of these women who were old enough to have lived during World War II had been writing about their experiences. (They called their text 'Not one minute of life for war'). Now at the onset of the Gulf War, they were active in *Renitenza alla Leva* (the conscientious objection movement) and printed cards for distribution to mothers to persuade them to hold back their sons from military recruitment. In some cases such a refusal could lead to a term of imprisonment. At this time, a writing group put on a drama about the horrors of World War II.

#### *Activity in the former Yugoslavia...*

1991 was also the year that Yugoslavia began to disintegrate. Piera, a psychotherapist, thinks of herself as a 'border' woman. She was born and lived until the age of eighteen in Gorizia, a region 300 miles to the west of Bologna, divided by the Italian/Slovenian border. Like Anna she had been actively involved in the women's movement of the 1970s and, she says, 'we are still feminist'. Now, in 1991, she joined some of the *Visitare* group at an event in Trieste to which they had invited women of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, Kosovo. 'It was very emotional,' said Piera. 'The Balkan women just could not believe that this moment of secession could really turn to war.' But war it soon became.

In 1992 the ethnic aggression spread to Bosnia. By now the women in Belgrade had taken the name Women in Black (*Zene u crnom*), learned from the Italian women, who had themselves adopted it from the Israeli women. Around this time, Piera, with Luisa Morgantini, Imma Barbarossa and other Italian women, joined Spanish women on a *Carovana della Pace* to the cities of Yugoslavia. They aimed to break the blockade by taking sanitary supplies and condoms. Piera remembers, 'We were afraid of being embargoed ourselves. Just getting across the border between Hungary and Yugoslavia took eight hours. It was depressing, endless queues of women carrying bags of goods to sell in Yugoslavia, in Vojvodina'.

From now on, *Donne in Nero* in Bologna would be active on two fronts, like many other Women in Black groups: on the one hand, travelling to conflict zones and supporting women surviving war and building bridges between women on opposing sides; and on the other challenging the policies of their own country. The two war zones with which they would be most in touch with those where the group had begun: ex-Yugoslavia and Israel/Palestine.

In 1994 in Bologna they joined other women, some in political parties, in a project, effectively a 'bridge of women', called *Spazio Pubblico di Donne*. It took place in Tuzla (Bosnia), Pancevo (Serbia) and Pristina (Kosovo). Piera said. 'There was a general refusal here, as elsewhere, to acknowledge the ethnic rapes.' When the war spread to Kosovo in 1998/9, D'Alema's *Sinistra Democratica* (DS) government would join the NATO bombing. Some Italian women, particularly those associated with *DS*, did not wish to oppose this policy. *DiN* took a contrary position.

This was the moment Lorenzina had joined *DiN* Bologna. She remembered how the moment had divided women - there were those who supported the NATO bombing; those who opposed the bombing; and those who like Women in Black Belgrade and Italy, said 'neither one nor the other', condemning both 'NATO in the sky, Milosevic on the ground'.

... and in Israel and Palestine

Meanwhile, several of the women continued visiting Israel and Palestine during the 1990s. Gabriella went to the region in 1992 and 1994, and in the year 2000, just after the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifada, she went with Luisa Morgantini to start new projects responding to Palestinian women's needs. The Bologna group participated in the rotation of week-long visits organized by Italian *DiN* groups. 'We would stay in a cheap Palestinian hotel in East Jerusalem and travel into the West Bank and Gaza on a daily basis. We had a close relationship with Women in Black and Bat Shalom – especially at first Yvonne Deutsch and Hagar Rublev'.

Until 2004 the women supported the slogan 'Two States for Two People'. Then like many others they began to despair of the viability of a Palestinian state and to favour the idea of a single state solution. But then again, Lorenzina reflected

a one state solution for Palestinians and Israelis would require such maturity! We had a lot of doubts. It's utopian and would benefit Israelis more than Palestinians. And in any case it does not reflect the wishes of women in the region, who we were supporting.

The group were then forced, by the overwhelming developments after 11 September 2001, including the bombardment of Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq, to turn their attention away from the Israel / Palestine issue.

*Working at local level in Bologna...*

To address these acts of war meant focusing on Italy, with local and national levels of action. Who were their local allies, I asked? Elements of the left and peace movement came together in Bologna, as elsewhere, to oppose the war on 'terror'. The *Associazione per la Pace* do not have a big presence here. But there was *Lilliput*, a mixed group with Christian inspiration, the Bologna

Social Forum, and women and men in various political parties and trade unions. There are however tensions in the movement, as we saw above in the case of the NATO bombing. For example *Rifondazione Comunista*, one of the parties that emerged from the demise of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), opposes the trial at The Hague tribunal of former Communist leaders of Yugoslavia.

But, Gabriella said, in any case, 'we want to stay a movement, ourselves as women, even if we are sometimes also present in the mixed movement'. At a certain moment, *DiN* groups in Italy were calling themselves *Donne in Nero e Non Solo* (Women in Black and Not Only) and there was a coordination of pacifist women's groups in Bologna, called *Infinite Donne Contro la Guerra*.

Among feminist allies in the city is the important *Associazione Orlando*, with which Raffaella Lamberti has been particularly associated. This is a cultural association of some substance, started by feminists, working for and with women in other countries, with a focus on development. *DiN* often co-operate with *Orlando* in specific projects - for example together they brought women speakers to the city from Israel and Palestine. Also in Bologna there is a *Carovana Civica*, in which women move from place to place, publicising global problems and social change. There is a lesbian group, *Arcilesbica*. And of course there is the women's house of Bologna, the full title of which is *Casa delle donne per non subire violenza*. Its main focus, as this suggests, is violence against women and it runs a refuge. *DiN* sometimes join them on issues that connect violence in peace and in war, such as migration, sex work and trafficking.

Organisations of migrant women with whom *DiN* could eventually ally are lacking in Bologna. There are no organized groups, for example, of Palestinian women or Iraqi women. In fact the presence of migrant groups in Bologna can't be compared, for instance, with London. But *DiN* have been very conscious of the damaging effect of post-9/11 legislation on migrants and, for instance, were active against internment of undocumented asylum seekers in special centres.

In the past *DiN* of Bologna had relations with Albanian women in a refugee camp near Bologna organising cultural events with them.

It's taken for granted in the group that racism and war go hand in hand. There are no women's groups specifically addressing racism, so their actions on this front are always mixed. Gabriella says

At the 'Time for Peace' event in Jerusalem, I remember Hagar urging us to work on our own Italian racism. And, yes, first and foremost we should analyse ourselves, start by looking at our own racism. There are subtle forms of it in each one of us that we need to perceive and understand. There is terrible racism in Italy, for example as expressed by the *Lega Nord*, and it's dangerous to ignore it.

At the same time Gabriella suspects the way the left here fetishize antiracism, campaigning against immigration controls without having a practical strategy for immigration.

But they can't - and we've no reply to that. At root we need to address the problem at source, with equitable development. We need a cancelling of debt. That sort of politics at the macro-level, and micro-credit schemes etc. for women at the grass roots level.

Piera had mentioned to me a current 'project of law' that would put information security under military control. *DiN* were supporting leftwing women parliamentarians in resisting it. Patricia told me that there was a feeling now in the group that they must focus more on these kinds of issues, the policies of the Italian state in relation to justice, human rights and war.

*...and working as a national Donne in Nero network*

In fact, this would be the topic of national *DiN* meeting they were anticipating, to be in Bologna a couple of weeks after my visit. Patricia said

We want to analyse how war is affecting our own lives, especially women's lives. We think that we can't go on only supporting women in other countries, when we're living in one that's actively making war. We'd like to share this analysis and the consciousness that it is shared. We should be coordinating our campaigns nationally.

A decision had been taken not to have a national *DiN* coordinator. Many of the women in the 46 local groups dislike the idea of the bureaucracy and hierarchy this might entail. They don't want to be involved in campaigns in which they don't have full autonomy and control. Rome has a big and active group, and inevitably the capital city is the place that receives most visits from women travelling from abroad. So it's difficult sometimes to avoid a sense of Rome's 'leadership' in the national network.

The same applies at an individual level. Luisa Morgantini, as a member of the European Parliament and former spokesperson for the *Associazione per la Pace* as well as, informally, for Italian Women In Black, has a high profile and in many ways this has been a valued asset to the movement. At first it was Luisa, Elisabetta and other women's groups who were the 'pioneers' in peace work, doing most of the travelling and making most of the contacts with women in conflict zones. Eventually, other women in local groups wanted to establish their own relationships with women in other countries and to be consulted about campaigns. Gradually the connections grew more diverse and more complex. Certain 'specialisms' developed - for instance Nadia Cervoni in Rome had good connections with Kurdish women and circulated their material to the network, while Patricia visited Colombia, got to know the women's groups there, and fed back their needs into the network.

Although they try to organized national meetings once or twice a year, there's little sense of *Donne in Nero* being a coherent movement, nationwide. Piera said 'Women in Black Italy isn't very unified. The most we can say of it is that it's a network'. This reflects a certain tension between the wish for local autonomy and a sense that the movement could have more impact if it were more coordinated. Patricia said

It's very difficult. But Women In Black should have better consciousness of the role we're playing in this country. People who know us, who know we exist, expect more from us. We should live up to those expectations. I'm sure this consciousness is what we have to work on. I am sure we can play a better role in Italy. But we can only do this if we develop and deepen our analysis.

It's not just analysis though, it's a question of communications. Every time they meet nationally they talk about whether to have a group e-address, use a listserv, to ease their e-mail communication. They've recently appointed a young woman to develop and manage the Italian *DiN* website. Patricia is less nervous than some *DiN* activists of 'organization'. She says

As a feminist, I don't want hierarchy. But a little bit of organization -- that we can't do without. Maybe it will take time, but we will get accustomed to taking, for example, e-mail connections, more seriously. We'll learn to open our computers every two days, not every two weeks.

Of course this raised questions too about the adequacy of our organization as an *international* network. Patricia believes that we should consider having a system of country contacts and perhaps a rotating spokesperson. 'After all we have unappointed delegates right now.' She believes 'it can give us more strength locally to be strong internationally, so they can't ignore us'.

In Bologna I heard two carefully expressed opinions about diversity and coherence. On the one hand Chiara said

I'd like us to be a global movement, but we need to know whether we have the same ideas, how much we have in common. You could see at the international meeting at Marina di Massa in 2003, that some of us have a feminist analysis, others don't. You can identify a religious element for instance. Some are politically analytical, others are doing the vigil as a kind of spiritual statement. Some groups advertise their vigil, just 'come along to a given place at a given time', without clarifying a particular belief. There are differences in Women in Black within Italy too – not only internationally.

To be a global movement we have to be conscious of our differences. After all we're a *movement*. We have no rules, and that's good. We don't need a line, or to exclude people. Nonetheless we do need to

make clear what each of us thinks. To do that we need to discuss more.

On the other hand, Gabriella feels differences of analysis and practice between *Donne in Nero* groups within and beyond the country is not all that important.

The power of Women In Black lies in its international character. We are few here in Bologna, and through this internationalism we can be more visible and effective. We are a global movement, that's our real strength. To absolutely 'align' or to be in total agreement isn't possible and probably to try to achieve it would be the end of the movement.

Each group works in its own reality. Each works with other groups positioned in *their* own reality. We don't need to agree on everything. I can work with women who have differences from me. We can work against war in different modalities. To be all against war is the main thing.

### **Thinking through concepts: feminism and patriarchy, nationalism and pacifism**

I asked the women in Bologna why they chose to organize *as women*, how they conceptualise the relation between gender and war, and how they express this connection on the street. Here are some of the answers...

Anna Zoli used to be a teacher -- now she's retired. Essentially, though, she's a writer, a poet, with a lot of creative energy. She trained in Psychosynthesis for five years. In answer to the question of 'why women?' she says

It's something I feel I need, to be with other women to help women change the historical situation of oppression – I am always trying to do that. I work with women in poetry, writing, doing readings together around our values. I want I put my life experience into it.

She feels she has to be nomadic among feminist groups and projects. Last year she organized a seminar on feminist history titled 'Feminists Meet and Talk Together'.

Lorenzina has worked a lot on conflict resolution among schoolchildren. She said she's in *Donne in Nero* above all for the relations. Her worklife was rather isolated, she says, and what impressed her was the relationship she saw existed among women in this group. Politically, it was the war in Kosovo in 1998/9 that shocked her into activism. Being involved in *DiN* responded to the anxiety and stress she felt around her. But sometimes she's disappointed. 'Events come so fast, we don't have time to cultivate our relations in *Donne in*

*Nero*. And for me that's sad. I'd like to work more on our conflicts within the group.'

Chiara's, age 36, is younger than most of the group. In fact, her mother was in Women in Black from 1990 - a feminist, from the 'old' women's movement, like many of the older women in *Donne in Nero* Bologna. Chiara says of herself

I began to need to belong to a group that discusses pacifism and war from a gender point of view. I'd read quite a lot about pacifism, but not yet much about gender. Among the women from the women's movement, including my mother, there's a way of thinking. I knew some of them before and from other activities. I joined them because you can see where they're coming from - not just because we're women.

Gabriella was formerly close to the left-wing *Partito di Unità Proletaria* (Party of Proletarian Unity). But she came to feel unsatisfied with it. She said

They were so abstract, they took no account of particular 'subjects', particularly female subjects. The *real* subject was male. The themes were dominated by male interests. Women tended to be invisible. I was visible because I was in the leading group of the party, but only visible as a *neutral subject*, not as a woman. I missed any sense of humanity in it.

When she separated from her husband, who was also closely involved in the party, she gradually made a move into women's activism. It was the late '70s. She formed a women's writing group (*Donne, Scrittura e Autocoscienza*), with whom she also made a radio programme together with other women. We used to 'think together about our lives. There was a strong '*auto-coscienza*' process going on at that time.' The radio program put them in touch with the group of feminists, including Raffaella Lamberti, around the Women's Documentation Centre in which they got involved after a while. So, she says, 'I made a different politics, with women, from 1978. But slowly! I am very slow. It is my nature. I call myself 'tortoise'!' In addition to working against war, she's interested in environmental health problems, especially to do with central Bologna.

It's a mixed group, as the party was. The difference is that now, in this, I'm present as a *woman* and I work with women in it. It's always the same, the male part creates problems. They want to be leaders, they want structures and visibility. That seems to be more important to them than solving problems.

I asked them whether they bring together, conceptually and in their street actions, male violence against women in the domestic sense and in war. Piera said that some of the group are involved in campaigning against the new law

on assisted fertilization that threatens to privilege the rights of the embryo over those of women. In this they've been cooperating with women of other groups and parties. So 'women's bodies' and 'violation of women's bodies in war' are on the *DiN* agenda. Patricia said, 'After all, we do say women's body is a battlefield in war and peace'.

There's a strong thread of feminist theory the group are confident they agree on. Piera said

Our analysis was strengthened by Women In Black Belgrade. They readily use concepts like 'patriarchal militarism' and '*familismo*'. We do too. But their use of this language had a special impact on us because Yugoslav women were experiencing these things on their own bodies.

I told them that in London we aren't all agreed in the group as to whether to use words like 'patriarchy', or 'men' and 'male violence' in our vigils against war. What kind of feminist language do they feel they can productively use? Women in Black of Bologna usually use words like 'patriarchy' in the public statements and vigils because we agree on the fact that 'war' is an issue of the patriarchal system and we should make it clear. They do not say 'men' and 'male violence' but they address the issue of the violence against women 'done by the male gender - not including every single man'.

I asked what they felt about the issue of whether Women in Black as an international network is, or should be, *in principle* antinationalist. This is something that often emerges in statements from *Zene u crnom*, Belgrade, who have seen nationalisms at their most violently destructive.

This group, it seems, have discussed the issue directly or dealt with it in vigils or leaflets. The general understanding is that they're opposed to nationalism, 'because we've seen the history of fascism and nazism here'. Recently, as other groups told me, there's been considerably more emphasis on the symbolism of nation: flags, funerals for heroes killed in Iraq. Against this they've asserted a clear 'anti-patriotism'. On the other hand, a lot of them were involved in supporting liberation movements in various parts of the world in the past, and have direct experience of Palestinians' aspirations today for a Palestinian state.

So, as other Women In Black groups find, principle sometimes has to concede something to positionality. In Bologna they have a similarly 'contingent' interpretation of pacifism. Gabriella expressed this most clearly.

In our group in Bologna, we're against all violence. For us all wars are wrong, there are really no humanitarian wars. Violence makes violence.

We talked about the Intifada, as a test case. She said

I can understand the Intifada. But the first, in 1987, was a matter of throwing stones. It was children, it was low-level violence, at least at the start. The response it drew from Israelis was always massively more violent. In the first intifada the role of women was big. But in the second intifada, since 2000, it's been less, precisely because the violence has been more. On the other hand, the pressure on Palestinians is enormous. So I can understand their violence, even if I don't give it legitimacy.

There are different kinds of wars [she went on]. I think each situation must be considered and the answer found on its own merits. In Italy there's no actual war here and now. But we do have instances of violence, and I'll oppose them. For example at the G8 meeting in Genova in 2001. But in Palestine, or South America – I don't live there! Each person must decide but can always opt for less rather than more violence. There is often a possibility of non-violent resistance. We can develop that space.

### **Acknowledgements and Contacts**

This profile is written on the basis of very interesting conversations with six women activists of *Donne in Nero*, Bologna. These were Anna Zoli, Chiara Gattullo, Gabriella Cappelletti, Lorenzina Pagella, Patricia Tough and Piera Stefanini. I would like to thank these friends enormously for their kind welcome and for sharing their ideas with me. I realise there are other Women In Black activists in Bologna I didn't have a chance to meet and talk with. I hope they'll read my sketch, and help improve on it. Special thanks to Anna and Patricia for putting me up overnight.

I sent this profile in draft to all those I interviewed in Bologna for comment and correction. (Unfortunately Anna Zoli was away at the time – she alone lacked the chance to read her words.) Once we had arrived at a version of the paper with which they felt comfortable, they agreed that it should be put on my website for women in other countries to enjoy and discuss.

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Bologna Website: work in progress

National website: <http://www.donneinnero.it/>

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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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