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NEW YORK: ALIKE IN SPIRIT, DIFFERENT IN PRACTICE: Two Women in Black Groups

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There are several Women in Black groups in or near New York. The two longest lived and most internationally known are the group that hold their vigil in Union Square on a Thursday, and the group that stand on the steps of the Public Library on a Wednesday. I focused my research on these two groups. It's important to remember, though, that just as they differ from each other, they may well differ from the unexplored NY WiBs.¹ Also, an archive of Women in Black material from around the world is maintained at the Public Library that I regret not having been able to visit (see Contacts, p.19 below).

THE UNION SQUARE GROUP

It's a sadness to me that I flew out of New York a few hours before the Thursday WiB vigil in Union Square. But I gained a lot of valuable information about the group from a collective interview with Lila Braine, Melissa Jameson and Judy Solomon; a talk over lunch with Anne Wangh and Sherry Gorelick; and a long one-to-one with Naomi Braine. This is what I learned.

Origins, composition and structure

Depending on their point of view, some women date the origins of this group to 1988, some to 2001. Sherry Gorelick tells the history this way.

Several of us were involved in the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. JWCEO was founded by Irena Klepfisz and others in direct response to the formation of Women in Black in Israel, soon after the start of the *intifada* [1987]. We began by vigilling on Park Avenue, in front of the office of the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. Later we moved to 80th Street and Broadway, where we knew we would find a more Jewish neighbourhood.

This series of regular New York Women in Black vigils ceased at the time of the 1st Gulf War and during the talks that led to the Oslo Accords, although in the following years occasional activities were organized by the group. Then, in September 2000, 'Sharon took his provocative walk in Jerusalem and the

¹ For instance, I had a brief meeting with Alice Sturm Sutter who told me a little about her group in northern Manhattan. It dates from April 2002, and is similar to the Union Square group, described below, in its focus on Israel.

second *intifada* started.’ Israeli WiB started vigilling again. And in New York, several of the old group were joined by new activists. On June 7 2001, the anniversary of the Occupation, an important action was organized. This was the foundational event of the revived WiB.

These women knew of the existence, since 1993, of another group, also calling themselves Women in Black, vigilling on a Wednesday afternoon on the steps of the Public Library in Manhattan. But they wanted their own vigil, because unlike the Library group they were mainly Jews, and mainly concerned with the Israel/Palestine situation. They thus sometimes call themselves the ‘Thursday group’ to distinguish themselves from the ‘Wednesday group’. They also know themselves as the ‘Union Square group’ reflecting the site they chose for their vigils. Union Square is on the edge of Greenwich Village and has always been a venue for public assembly and protest. It became a focus after 9/11, a site where thousands came from all over the city, bringing flowers and other tributes to the dead.

Among the initiating members of the Union Square group were Lila Braine and her daughter Naomi Braine, Sherry Gorelick, Minnie Berman and Marcia Bernstein. Others soon joined them. An e-mail list was drawn up derived from the 7.6.01 event and the contacts of women who had been active in Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) and Jews Against the Occupation (JATO). Today the vigil usually numbers around 20, though on occasion they can draw up to 60 or 70. All but a handful are Jews. In age they range from 30 to 85, and three or four men are regular attenders at the vigil. Although some of the women are friends, the vigil is ‘not a friendship group’. They don’t spend a great deal of time together apart from attendance at vigils. In fact they told me, ‘You have to understand that it isn’t a group at all. It’s who shows up.’ Many women are seen at vigils whom the core group don’t necessarily know. The outer boundary of the group is the extent of the e-mail list – now some two hundred addresses. WiB Union Square have no sources of funding other than individual donations.

At first there were no ‘coordinating meetings’. A year ago however a decision was made (see below) that was upsetting to at least one of the founding group, both for its content and the way in which it was made. In response to this disagreement it was decided to establish a ‘steering group’ of five, empowered to make decisions for the whole vigil. Anyone may volunteer to join it, so long as they fit these criteria: you must be a woman, a regular attender at the vigil, committed to focusing on Israel/Palestine issues, and support the principles of the Coalition of Women for a Just Peace (in Israel, an alliance of which WiB forms a part). They usually meet once a month, immediately after the vigil, in a nearby café.

Inclusion and representativity in the steering group isn’t achievable by election, because there’s no definable ‘membership’ of the larger group. The nearest thing to ‘plenaries’ are the infrequent occasions when an open meeting is announced. So they work on a principle of rotation: a member of the steering group should serve for six months and then retire. But despite frequent invitations to vigillers to volunteer, there aren’t many takers for the

job. Despite the difficulty of finding replacements, the group do at least aim to observe a practice of leaving the group after six months, even if they come back after a further half-year.

Responsibilities of the steering group include determining the content of placards and leaflets, and planning particular events. In other words, they 'work out the parameters'. I heard different views in the group as to the amount of conscious political analysis that underlies their actions. (Please see my further discussion of this on p.16.)

Choices of focus, practice and strategy

Although the Thursday group do organize occasional events, usually in an open space, involving speakers, its main activity is the weekly vigil. The focus of the vigil is quite clearly Israel/Palestine.

Nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath of 11 September they of course responded to that situation. Naomi says:

You had to talk about the war on terror at that moment. And, being us, we couldn't *not* talk about Israel. So it was both. We spoke about what our country was doing, how Sharon was using it as a cover to intensify his own actions. Eventually we shifted [back] to an exclusively Israel/Palestine focus.

In addition, each of them is now concerned, inevitably, about the invasion and continuing occupation of Iraq. And in the run up to the presidential election they're also concerned to defeat Bush. But the women find ways of expressing themselves on these other (non-Israel) issues in different organizations and venues – including attending the major national demos.

The vigil's sustained and singular focus on Israel/Palestine is reflected in its visual materials. Their regular placards therefore sustain an invariable focus on Israel. The 8 foot black banner reads 'End the Occupation' in English, Hebrew and Arabic. Smaller placards include:

- End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.
- Israeli and Palestinian women say: the Occupation is killing us all.
- Jewish voices for peace.
- Stop the Wall: don't say you didn't know.

These slogans are decided collectively (through the mechanism of the steering group) and designed and produced to look coherent and good. Individual vigillars may on occasion bring their own placard, and, so long as this is within the agreed political and stylistic range, it's accepted. However, the selection of slogans is very conscious and deliberately narrow, in order not to deter too many potential vigillars. For instance, note that the word 'Palestine', which could be taken to imply an unquestioned right of Palestinians to nation-statehood, is not used. Note also that the words

'Jewish' and 'women' appear on the placards, signalling the nature of the group to passers-by.

The vigil is organized as a long line, of women, and also a minority of men, wearing black. It's silent, in the sense of no loudspeakers, chanting or shouting. But vigilliers do move about and chat with each other. 'We just can't keep quiet', they say. (See my further discussion of silence on p.15.) In these respects the Union Square vigil is very similar to WiB in Israeli cities, on whom they consciously model themselves and whose principles constitute the core position of the group.

Unlike an anarchist group that often stands at the same time in a different part of Union Square, Women in Black have a police permit for the vigil. This has proved protective when they've been attacked by the pro-Sharon opposition. And it appears that this vigil does attract a good deal of aggressive response from passers-by. At times the women are all but assaulted – people scream in their faces, slap the placards. Naomi wrote me

the harassment is very gendered and homophobic. The harassers are largely men, and they explicitly attack us as women (Arafat's whores etc.). They also use a lot of homophobic language, calling the men who stand with us faggots, calling us lesbians, focusing in particular on those of us who are perceived as 'butch'.

Judy explained how they handle hecklers. It is understood that arguing back is neither acceptable nor effective.

There are a few people in the group who have been sort of informally designated to deal with difficult people who attack us verbally or come too close and yell in our face, or hand out their own leaflets in our permit area. Those people are usually better at it than others of us, because they remain reasonable and calm. There have been occasions when we have had to call the police to escort hostile hecklers back across the street, where a very religious right-wing group tend to come from time to time.

The women I spoke with are very happy with the choice of place and the vigil form. Judy says:

I love it that in our area ordinary people, cabbies, cyclists, kids, people of colour of all ages, they see us and lots will give a thumbs up sign. It's good for people to see that not all Jews agree with Sharon.

The group see their strategy as educational, reaching out to the public, Jew and non-Jew alike. Leafletting is therefore important. The leaflet content changes from time to time. At present there's an emphasis on protesting the building of the Wall in the West Bank. Lila says:

It's important to stand out there and say that not every Jew supports the Israeli government. It gives courage to other Jews. It's important for

people to see us there and read our leaflets. It's additional information. It helps to counteract all the misinformation there is about.

For Melissa for instance it's not only the verbal content of the vigil that matters, it's the very process of protesting.

Exercising free speech in the USA, especially now, is crucial. If you don't use it, you lose it. We stand in a commercial area and at the end of the working day people come out and see us making a political statement. WiB is free speech in practice...Speaking your mind politically is important. It's good to bring these taboo subjects of politics and religion out of the closet. And thirdly, it's about 'speaking truth to power'. You do it because you never know the effect it will have. I believe one person can make a difference. I don't think actions have to be big or flashy. I believe in the little way.

The women I spoke with expressed their own personal motivations for being part of Union Square vigil very clearly. Anne for instance gave three reasons:

First, it's because of your own intense pain, your own inner needs. You can't not act. Second, you take strength from the community of others who think and feel as you do, while your action encourages them as well. And third, paler perhaps, is the effect you might have on passers-by.

And how would you reckon to achieve that effect? Just being there. 'The look of us?!' It's a very local strategy of influencing the thinking and perhaps even the actions of passers-by, one by one.

The political environment, agenda-shaping, and individual motivations

As elsewhere in the USA, the wider anti-war and anti-Bush environment in which all Jewish anti-Sharon activism in New York has to position itself includes the national coalition United for Peace and Justice within which a significant (and often resented) force is the hard-line leftist organization ANSWER. Some founders of this vigil were also founders of the UPFJ. There is also an overlapping membership between the vigil and smaller mixed-sex activist groups such as the War Resisters League.

But the Thursday group have decided to focus explicitly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lila for instance says: 'There has to be something you're addressing. Just non-violence, or peace, is too broad for me.' Therefore, they must also position themselves within a wider Jewish political environment. Three significant Jewish organizations opposing the Occupation are Brit Tzedek vi Shalom, Tikkun and JATO. BZ is notably more cautious and conservative than Union Square WiB. They, and Tikkun too, have less of a street presence, preferring to work as political lobbyists. JATO is to the left of both BZ and Tikkun, and (with some exceptions) also of WiB, calling for the right of return of Palestinians to Israel, and using the slogan 'Free Palestine'. It attracts younger Jews, of both sexes, and has a strong lesbian and gay

membership and a greater openness to conflict and argument. Naomi and some others of WiB enjoy taking part in JATO's more dramatic and funky actions, while others again would keep a distance.

Incidentally, this term 'Free Palestine' has divided members of the WiB group. When a JATO member came to the Thursday vigil carrying such a sign, while most accepted it, despite some discomfort, one woman felt quite unable to be associated with it. Just using the word 'Palestine' seemed to her to imply an end to Israel as a Jewish state. This raises the question where exactly the leftwards and rightwards boundaries of the political agenda fall within WiB and how they are determined. It seemed to me that the choice of agenda was made on the basis of the limits of tolerance of the most radical and most conservative of the more active members.

I wondered aloud whether this meant 'the most Zionist and the most anti-Zionist' members – but I came to understand that those terms are difficult to define and highly inflammatory in the immediate political environment, so they are not used within the group. There is also, it should be noted, a difference between what the group understand its agreed agenda to include and what they feel able to put out to the public. Thus while they personally agree with the idea of 'two states for two people' and 'a shared Jerusalem' they don't put these terms on placards or in leaflets.

But the slogans of the Thursday group are politically more outspoken than those of BZ and Tikkun. The latter usually start by assuring their Jewish audience 'we support Israel, we love Israel'. The founders of the WiB group wanted to be much more challenging of mainstream Jewish opinion than this. They want to acknowledge that Israel is the main perpetrator, uses more force, has greater power and carries greater responsibility.

Communications

In early 2004 the Union Square group set up their own website, though not all the women I spoke with were aware of it. The small steering group communicate with each other by personal e-mail and phone. For the rest, they rely for connectedness on Naomi who subscribes and unsubscribes members of the list wib_thursday@yahoo.com. This is not an interactive list, but provides for a one-way flow of information.

The Thursday group's nearest WiB neighbours are the Wednesday group meeting at the Public Library. Anne has from time to time attended the Wednesday vigil too. Some members of the latter are on the list, whereby they inform each other about forthcoming activities and sometimes cooperate, coming together for occasional events. But the two groups clearly feel different and separate, both in focus and style.

Naomi selects and forwards to the local group information from the many local and national sources from which she receives it. These include national communications from <wibcaucusus> and various individuals or vigil groups in the WiB network. But Union Square are in fact more nourished, I felt, by

information flows from the Jewish groups in the US environment than from women's networking. Thus Anne said, 'Even in Manhattan we're so far apart. It's more natural for us somehow to go to JATO locally than to go out of town or across town to attend another WiB vigil'.

The Union Square group also receive, screened down by Naomi, international communications, both from Israel (the Coalition, New Profile, Bat Shalom etc.) and from WiB (Yolanda, Lieve). Some vigillers (Sherry is one) independently subscribe to multiple sources of information, but others are happy to have Naomi furnish information to them, while at the same time protecting them from being swamped by unstoppable news on an ever-expanding range of issues.

Some of the women expressed clearly the feeling that too much information and connectedness was more of a threat to them than too little. 'What am I going to do with it all? You begin to shut down on what you can read.' So passionate is the commitment of this group to activism on the Israel/Palestine issue (as Sherry put it, this 'has defined my life's work') that seeking equally deep information on other wars is not practicable.

Some women felt a touch of anxiety (albeit combined with pride) concerning Women in Black having surged way beyond the borders of Israel to become an international network dealing with every manifestation of war and militarism from Colombia to Sudan.

Women, feminism, gender, men

I asked 'why are you a women's group?' Lila said emphatically 'I'm an old-time feminist. It works. We're comfortable with it. I like working with women.' Melissa is not an old-time feminist, she says, but is happy with the fact that the group had been founded on feminist principles which she could see set a certain tone, and meant a non-hierarchical structure, an agreeable process, and no rigid line. 'It lets people be as they are.' Judy joined the group less because it was feminist than because she is Jewish and 'so appalled at what's being done in my name' But she felt good about reflecting the co-operation between Jewish and Palestinian women practised by WiB in Israel: 'women of both sides who lost family members, who know what war means...Women are the ones who worldwide are responsible for children, take the brunt of war.' For Anne the starting point is 'why do you find so many women doing peace?' and, answering herself, mentioned the influence of testosterone on behaviour. We discussed the reliance of much of the women's movement on 'social construction' to explain behaviour. But Anne felt that arguments from biology were not out of order. 'The more handles we have on this the better'. (See my further discussion of gender on p.16.)

There's another kind of analysis within the Union Square group, though. Naomi represented a contrasted way of seeing the 'woman' question in WiB. This perspective derives in part from the strong lesbian presence in Union Square. Ten out of the group of twelve that organized the (re)founding event of 7.6.01 were lesbians. Of the group of four that started the subsequent vigil,

two were lesbians. Today probably between 30 and 40% of the active vigillers are lesbians.

It is not that this strong lesbian presence is articulated as a lesbian politics. Naomi says:

There is no explicitly lesbian analysis here. The majority of us are Jewish. It's our experience as Jews, not as lesbians, that motivates us. As American Jews we want to learn from our history...[If the public presence of the group is not visibly lesbian] this is to do with struggling to create groups that will be comfortable to the Jewish community. We're flagrantly queer. But it's a strategic choice not to be explicit. The place we speak from is that of radical Jews.

(It will be apparent that there are divergencies within the Union Square group on some of these questions. These very differences, to me, gave it an interesting dynamic. Some contrary views were helpfully spelled out in comments I received on the first draft of this paper. At this point Sherry, for instance, wrote 'I am a lesbian, but I do not agree that 'we are flagrantly queer'. I also do not agree with Anne's biological determinism. I think it's great that you present the diverse views. But I think you must make clear who's speaking when.')

To return to Naomi, she too sees feminism as the basic starting point of the group. But she has a deep political anxiety about a tendency she believes exists in WiB generally 'to glorify women as peaceful, all the earth mother stuff'. (I should perhaps say here that many WiB's around the world would heatedly contest this perception of WiB politics!) It is a tendency Naomi disliked also in the anti-missile actions of the 1980s (Seneca Falls, Greenham Common). By contrast, 'the Thursday group has ties to a queer activist sensibility that the Wednesday (Library) group doesn't.' For Naomi feminism is 'a more multifaceted analysis, about multiple axes of oppression and how they interact.' In short it's less about women than gender. She sees this articulated well in the politics of New Profile, an Israeli feminist organization of women and men, particularly in the intelligent voices of some young female, as well as male, refuseniks.

Reactions to having men at the vigil point up this difference. For some of the women, men are just acceptable as allies, on the ground that you wouldn't reject them. 'Having men is not an issue with any of us. We aren't separatists.' They don't require or expect the men to have a particular analysis of gender, specifically of masculine cultures, in relation to war and militarism. After all, they themselves do not particularly press such an analysis. The acceptance of men is also based on their manifest behaviour. Sherry said: 'The ones who tend to come along are Jewish, some are young, they're very feminist and caring. They're very different from other men. They have a similar energy to our own. No testosterone!' It is well understood by the women and by the men that men are welcome as vigillers but don't take part in decision-making.

For Naomi, however, and others who share her point of view, the presence of men, especially gay men, is something different and more positive. It's a guarantee of a particular politics, a particular interpretation of feminism, an analysis that invokes 'gender' rather than the essentialist category: 'women'.

It's because there are men there, because it's not silent. That opens doors. Our Thursday group connects to two different networks.... The most sophisticated feminist commentaries on militarism aren't coming from WiB, here, but are gay and lesbian. There are gay men who are feminist-educated, and not masculine. The interesting and creative stuff is happening through the synergistic effects of queer culture with feminism.

Naomi is one member of the Thursday group (and there may be others) whose activism on Israel is framed within a critique of militarism. Opposition to militarism she finds more conducive to a strong gender analysis than activism around particular wars. It's a disappointment to her that the growing movement against global corporate capital is currently devoid of both gender consciousness and a critique of militarism.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY GROUP

I stood with the Women in Black vigil on the steps of the Public Library on 42nd Street in central Manhattan one dark wet afternoon in May. There were five women under dripping umbrellas. One stood out in the rain holding her leaflets toward the passers-by. It reminded me a lot of London. I had a chance to carry out separate interviews with three of these vigillers - Indira Kajosevic, Julie Finch and Pat De Angelis. (But see *Like light on water*, p...below.)

Origins and development

This Women in Black group had its origins in 1993. Several of the women who founded the vigil had been in the Women's Action Coalition of those days. They told me the Coalition had been 'brilliant, with spontaneous actions, artists, theatre, meetings every week'. It was feminist, 'quite lesbian', and dealt with issues such as women's equal rights, sexual harassment and cases of rape. If it had a fault, it was that it wasn't very inclusive in terms of race and class, being mainly middle-class women 'living in an economic comfort zone'.

In 1992 Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in wars of terrible violence between people defined on the basis of ethnicity. In January 1993 there was a women's march of protest from Central Park to the UN building. Dustin Spear, an artist, had made some costumes, elaborate black dresses called *Three Women in Black*, that would eventually travel to many places, including Serbia. (NB: not to be confused with the costumes of the *Women in Black Art Project*.) Soon afterwards a group of women began to hold regular vigils in front of the United Nations building, focusing their protest on the appalling sexual violence against 'enemy' women, in the course of the 'ethnic cleansing', just then filling the newspaper headlines.

The Women's Action Coalition fell apart, but the vigils continued monthly, now modelling themselves on Women in Black (*Zene u Crnom*) in Belgrade. A year later a young woman, Indira Kajosevic, a postgraduate political science student at the University of Belgrade, came to New York with a study grant. In Belgrade she'd been an active member of *ZuC* with whom she'd found a political home. This was the one environment in Belgrade, in this time of intense ethnic hatreds, that as a daughter of a Montenegrin Muslim father and an Albanian mother she could feel not only safe but welcome. It was the practice of *ZuC* from the start of the wars to maintain supportive connections between women of all so-called ethnic groups in the area of the former Yugoslavia, as well as to develop links with feminists in other countries. 'They were maintaining a safe place for all of us,' Indira said, 'at a time when a lot of friends were leaving the country. We used to have many deep conversations in the WiB flat. There were trainings. It was lively and active.'

Indira had already met some of the New York women, including Dustin Spear and Laurence Hovde, when they travelled to Novi Sad for one of the WiB annual encounters organized by *ZuC*. Now they welcomed her in New York and drew her into the vigil, which quickly became her new political home. 'With them I could let my hair down,' she says now. Likewise Indira's presence in the group, and that of other former Yugoslav women, including Vera Seinrich, Sanja Llubcic and Iska Cickovic, had the effect of strengthening the vigil's engagement with the situation in the former Yugoslavia.

They used to meet regularly at Dustin's place. They visited schools, organized talks and developed a website. They often issued public statements, about US war policy but also about local violence. At one time they issued a monthly fact sheet on all such issues. The vigil was eventually moved away from the draughty, and largely empty, UN plaza to the steps of the Public Library, where they didn't need police permission and would be seen by more passers-by. 'And after all the Library's an institution that signals respect for freedom of expression!' said Pat De Angelis, one of the founders of the vigil. There has usually been one woman in the group that took responsibility for the banner, photocopying the leaflet and coordinating vigils. Indira and Stephanie played this role for a while. Then in the winter of 2001 when Indira left New York for a while, Pat De Angelis took over.

In some periods the Public Library vigil would be held monthly, in others, in response to a particular crisis, it would be on a weekly basis. For a while after the Dayton Accords of 1995 the women altogether ceased to meet, but reconvened during the Kosovo war. Pat remembers bumping into Stephanie Damoff in a supermarket one day in 1999. Stephie said 'we're starting with WiB again' and Pat said immediately, 'I'll be there'. The group was strengthened by the publicity when in 2000, Women in Black Belgrade were awarded the UNIFEM and International Alert Millennium Peace Prize, and came to New York to receive the award. Then came the attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon of 11 September 2001 and they were

immediately on the Public Library steps again. They have been there every single Wednesday since that time.

Composition

This WiB has always been relatively small, usually with a core of six or seven very active women, building to fifteen or twenty at certain moments. 'Our vigil can fall down to three or four women at times. Then somebody's touched by seeing us there, and joins us. And it begins to grow again.' But the WiB presence outside the Public Library has often attracted individual women who didn't come because they wanted to 'join an organization', just because they welcomed a ready way to make a public statement.

In the early years of Public Library Women in Black, some very well-known women, including actors, academics and lawyers, and peace-workers from e.g. WILPF, the Quakers and the War Resisters' League, stood with the vigil. More recently it has been made up (as one put it) of more 'modest women', such as a mother whose son is a US Marine serving in Iraq. Ann Mullen may be typical. She joined the vigil right after 9.11 after learning of the group's existence on the Web. She is a divorced mother of three, grandmother, semi-retired but working in the City Parks and volunteering in a local hospital. And (so she told Pat) she positively likes the way the group look like 'ordinary women' and thus easier to relate to and join.

At the start many women of the organizing group, like Indira, would have been in their twenties and thirties. Today they're more typically in their forties and fifties, Indira being the youngest at thirty-eight. Three of them, Indira, Stephanie and Pat, had met each other at New School where they worked or studied. They've included highly creative women in theatre, film and the arts. They've been mainly white. Jewish membership didn't grow, as it might have done when the second *intifada* began and Israel/Palestine hit the world's headlines again, because the Union Square (Thursday) vigil group would soon establish itself with a strong appeal to Jews opposing Sharon's policies. Anne Wangh, for instance, shifted her main allegiance to Union Square when that group formed. Jews, lesbians and LGBT people as individuals undoubtedly stand in the Public Library vigil, but these identities are not as politicized as they are in the Thursday group.

And what about men? It is somehow agreed in the Wednesday vigil that they are comfortable being a group of women. 'If we meet with belligerence on the street it's from men,' Pat said. However, this year a small group of Veterans for Peace have begun to stand beside the vigil. Pat says, 'Our women are happy to have them alongside us'.

Choice of focus

The focus of the Wednesday vigil is much wider and more diverse than that of the Thursday vigil, with its singular protest against the Israeli Occupation. The Public Library group's concerns range from violence itself, particularly against women, to any outbreak of aggression on the world stage. They've responded

to outbreaks of violence in New York. And they've reacted to one major war after another on the international stage: Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq. But it's immediate phenomena they address, rather than the longer term issue of US militarization and global projection of force. They are aware of that, but don't work on it as a group – leaving individuals free to take on other forms of activism on their own.

That the group is feminist is implicit, rather than explicit. Within a general anti-war protest they single out women's experience and women's issues for particular emphasis. They respond as women to the reality 'that women are being hurt, both themselves and their loved ones' (as Pat put it). They highlighted rape and other abuses of women in the Bosnian and subsequent wars. They also believe in the wider WiB policy of bridge-building across identity groups being constructed as conflictual. Julie, for instance, says that for her the 'exciting newness' of Women in Black's message is that 'we don't want their husbands, sons, brothers killed. And they don't want our husbands, sons, brothers killed. We say: we refuse to be enemies'.

After September 11 their vigil took a clear line on George Bush's posture, warning against a vengeful war on terrorism. This was a difficult message for many New Yorkers to hear. Indira, who was the main coordinator of the vigil at that time, said 'It was hard to be on the street at that time. We were spat on. But there were lots of women coming to us, needing something. It was as if they thought of us as some kind of "headquarters".' They received a lot of phone calls and e-mail messages at this time, from women across the USA, asking how to start their own vigils. They were alert to the threat of a grand jury subpoena against Women in Black. They responded to media enquiries.

Choice of practice

One 'crucial element' of Women in Black (as Julie put it) is that 'it lets us start a vigil, of our own, on our own. No expert oversight is necessary.' The Wednesday vigil have chosen a vigil practice that is deliberately consistent and simple in form. They have one large banner they hold, reading 'Women in Black against War'. Interestingly, after September 11, they changed their earlier banner 'Women in Black against Violence' to this new wording. It's not their usual practice to make and carry additional placards (although they did in the past). They maintain absolute stillness and they cherish silence. Those of them who have on occasion attended the Union Square vigil feel uncomfortable with its restlessness, the talking and the proliferation of signs. At the Public Library, the only person to engage with the public is Pat, who hands out leaflets and will answer questions. The others just want to be 'silently thoughtful'. Julie Finch said 'We shall be silent, but we won't be silenced. That's a play on words I feel is powerful.' Several members mentioned to me how important the opening phrases of their mission statement are to them, words that represent this purposeful 'silence' as central to the group's character. Silence is both the message and the medium. (See more on silence, p.15.)

We are silent because mere words cannot express the tragedy that wars and hatred bring. We refuse to add to the cacophony of empty statements that are spoken with the best intentions yet may be erased or go unheard under the sound of a passing ambulance or a bomb exploding nearby.

Our silence is visible. We invite women to stand with us, reflect about themselves and women who have been raped, tortured or killed in concentration camps, women who have disappeared, whose loved ones have disappeared or have been killed, whose homes have been demolished. We wear black as a symbol of sorrow for all victims of war, for the destruction of people, nature and the fabric of life.

In the main it's the simple one-page mission statement in which these words appear that constitutes the leaflet Pat distributes to the public while the other women maintain the vigil. But she says 'We don't want the Library group to be static. We'd want it to be open to more than the expression of the mission statement. Though right now, given the situation here, that statement is essential.' On occasion therefore they top-up the flyer with an additional message. For instance in the aftermath of September 11 they were using the words of an appeal drafted by WiB London and agreed internationally in WiB 'to all those with responsibility and authority, in our national governments and international institutions, to step back from war' and urging that 'vengeance must be resisted'. A year later their leaflet called on all political and military authorities 'to combine their efforts in seeking strategies for an inclusive, just and equal global society'. And in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in early 2003 the leaflet called, in place of this unprovoked violence, 'for pre-emptive strikes against hunger, poverty, AIDS and homeless in the United States and throughout the world'. Such formulations and reformulations of the leaflet are usually written by one woman and checked with the others. 'There's always a consensus process working,' Julie says.

But on the whole this group prefer not to change their leaflet too often. They believe simplicity is the best way to create awareness. They don't get into detailed statements and postures about each war. 'Our message is very simple,' Indira says. 'War is no way to resolve conflict. There are other, better means.' 'If we changed the leaflet more,' said Pat, 'then we might debate more and it might give rise to arguments. We might get bogged down with non-essentials.' And Julie added, 'I love the language of our leaflet... We never [sic] make changes in it and so we don't have to have meetings. So there's never a problem about consensus. Other people don't seem to want discussion, and that's OK with me.'

They don't consider themselves a particularly academic or intellectual group. 'We're lacking an overtly intellectual approach to the thing, maybe,' Pat said. 'In our city, in our country, there's so little reflection. We're so bombarded with information and images that we need space for thought.' At times they've got together in a nearby café after the vigils, but all the women are busy with other commitments and often too tired after the vigil to sit down and hold a thorough-going discussion. They don't so much choose their actions on the

basis of an analysis collectively hammered out, as respond to their own reading of the political news and to deep feelings of conscience that each feels and each has good reason to believe the others share.

Communications

The key communicator in the Public Library group has been Stephanie Damoff, whose e-mail address appears on the leaflet. While Stephanie is away from the group preoccupied with a doctoral thesis, Julie has taken on more of the linking work, 'because I like to 'outreach'. I'm the one that keeps e-mailing, urging people to do this and that. I nip people's heels like a terrier', she says. The group feel a degree of casualness is acceptable. 'Sometimes there's no communication at all. Sometimes women bring news of up-coming anti-war or pro-justice events. So long as we turn out to vigils on a Wednesday it seems to work OK,' Pat said.

The Wednesday and Thursday vigil groups stand side by side on some occasions. For instance they have protested together in front of the United Nations on the June anniversary of the 1967 Israeli Occupation of Palestine, and in October on the anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that addresses women's role in conflict prevention. There is an overall sense of mutual supportiveness between the two groups. But there's rather little day to day communication. Pat said 'I feel bad about that. But I also feel you have to go with what people can do, what turns them on. It's a big city after all. They have ideas of their own. And there are time limitations.' But she sometimes worries about fragmentation. There's another WiB group now meeting uptown.

In relation to other US WiBs, Julie is in the nation-wide listserv (wibuscaucus@yahoogroups.com) and is often the one who contacts other WiBs (Baltimore, New Paltz, Woodstock) to join mobilizations together. In relation to international WiB, she, Pat and Stephanie are on Yolanda's and Lieve's lists. Members appreciate that they filter messages before forwarding, because (just like Union Square) some members feel communications from these wider areas can be overwhelming. Besides, being in New York at the hub of international flights, they connect with many overseas women when they visit the US. One or two have been to the international encounters. Katerina Ceman maintains their website <http://womeninblack.net>, while information is provided by members of the group.

Political environment

Unlike the Union Square group, the Public Library group are not networked into Jewish activist civil society. It is within the wider anti-war movement they locate themselves. They support United for Peace and Justice demonstrations, and respect the War Resisters' League. (But most of them steer clear of ANSWER, finding its leaders and spokespersons unacceptably violent in words and style.)

In relation to women's activism, they're aware of WILPF and respect its work, 'but they have no street presence here'. It felt good to take the banner and link up with other WiBs in Washington DC for the January 18, 2003, demonstration called by United for Peace and Justice. They joined the worldwide women's mobilization on November 1, 2003, called by the Mexican women's organization *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas*, to protest the failure to prosecute perpetrators of the rape and murder of Mexican women in Chihuahua and Ciudad Juarez.

Some outward connections are made through individual affiliations. For instance, Indira is a community worker and believes it's important for WiB to be concerned with US government policies and to connect to local issues. For instance they took up the very local issue of a group called 'Women in Mourning and Outrage' that formed for a while to protest the brutal police shooting of an African American man in New York. Indira also personifies a link to Balkan and East European organizations, e.g. through the Network of East/West Women. Julie is a Quaker and a member of Amnesty International.

Thoughts about strategy

So what is the strategy for getting an effect across the rather wide spectrum of issues the Public Library group addresses? It's creating awareness in people they encounter, one by one, on the street. And the people who see the vigil, in the rush hour on 42nd Street, are quite varied. There are a lot of tourists, a lot of office workers. And Pat finds it interesting that 'The hands that reach out for the flyers, the people whose eyes meet mine, are most often people of colour. Sometimes they say "thank you". They know the effects of war is going to fall on their children, who often enroll in the military to get an education.' Indira believes that through ordinary people you can make changes happen. You can change the way they vote. Some who see you may themselves be, or may become, policy makers.

For Julie, the best strategy is to offer an idea rather than to try and convince someone.

Code Pink push their leaflets on people. The Library group leafletter just holds the leaflet in her hand. If a person walking by wants it, they take it. I like that. Our vigils are "bearing witness" in the Quaker way.

For Pat De Angelis the main strategy of the Public Library vigil is 'planting seeds in people's minds'. This springs from her own experience – remembering the moments when her own mind was turned around: seeing people being arrested for antinuclear activity in 1955, being touched by Martin Luther King. She's alert to the potential for violence in herself. She feels, 'We have to start with individuals. Each of us lives in our own present, our own backyard. We have to work for peace and justice in our own lives, primarily.' Then we have to model that it is possible to stand up – for something and against something. 'Yes, we're for peace. But no war - not in my name.' They do consider information work through use of the media to be important, attempting to use National Public Radio and 'Democracy Now', and are

frustrated by the difficulty of obtaining air time. If they lobby politicians however it is an individual rather than a group effort. 'WiB can't be everything. What we do in the vigil, that's a common, simple message to the world.'

THINGS THIS NEW YORK VISIT MADE ME THINK ABOUT

It's becoming my habit to end these profiles with some reflection on the thoughts active in my head as I travel on. This is what I was thinking about as I flew down to Florida.

The big issue of silence

I think I began by thinking, mistakenly, that the actual form of Women in Black vigils could not be a serious point of divergence between groups. But the experience of New York has led me to understand that the form of our public action, particularly silence (and stillness) is itself a strategic choice, and has many political implications. As we saw, the Public Library group make a very clear statement about this: silence speaks, they say. Accompanied by a bare minimum of visual words, it expresses a simple message powerfully.

Julie, formerly a dancer, now an actor, knows from experience that silence can move and touch people.

Also, the silence means, we are not here to argue or debate. This is how we feel. This is our witness. This is like a beginning of healing. This is non-violent action. This is mediation. Listen to us (if you want to). Any passer-by who wants to vent, argue or intellectualize is quietly pointed in the leafletter's direction. If the person is that angry, they don't even want a leaflet, or throw it away. I think your analysis is a trap. I read the newspapers and webnews sites every day. I have my opinion of the truth. And I'm expressing it once a week. I intend to give inspiration, courage, thought to a passer-by.

But the Union Square group feel differently about silence. Sherry wrote

There is so much ignorance about Israel/Palestine that to be silent would be to have the meaning of our vigil supplied by the ignorance created by the media. Silence is complicity unless the void is filled by communication.

Union Square seems to manage to appeal to a bigger group, albeit within a particular political community, perhaps precisely by being as mobile and casual as they are. Maybe it's this interactiveness that enables it to embrace a mixed bunch of Jews and non-Jews, straight and gay, women and men, and, besides, to span some nuanced intra-group differences on particular issues in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

What's the connection between action and analysis?

I increasingly feel, as I meet different WiBs, a certain mystery surrounding the relationship between action and analysis. Talking to many women it seems that what motivates a vigil, what casts women out onto the street week after week, is a shocking bolt of emotion – hurt for those being maimed and bereaved, rage at what governments do in our name. In both these vigils some women told me ‘it’s what I *feel*’, ‘we don’t *do* analysis’.

So I was beginning to feel that a consciously articulated and agreed analysis doesn’t seem to be a necessary condition of coming together to organize vigils. For that, the personal pain is sufficient. Yet Lila remarked ‘Yes, some “bolt of emotion” must be experienced to get someone into the street. But I would argue that that emotion is aroused by your perception or analysis of information’.

She also pointed out that there is a profound consensus among them on one simple matter: ‘the Israeli government is morally wrong in its occupation and behaviour in relation to the Palestinians’. And, Sherry adds, ‘I do think that we lose a lot by not discussing the issues, but it also protects us from schisms and allows us to form a unity based on the elements upon which we agree. It allows us to be more inclusive.’

Besides, talking individually to women I found that, although in neither WiB do they sit down as a group to hammer out an understanding and a point of view on changing events, there’s a kind of invisible analytic process. Everyone in fact reads the papers and watches the TV news with a high degree of attentiveness, and some read more widely on the underlying issues of militarism and neo-imperialism. Shared interpretations of the shifting news define the borders of an agenda. The practice of writing flyers and discussing changes of content with each other is itself a kind of analysis.

The slippery area between ‘women’ and ‘gender’

In both these groups, but more in the Public Library group, there’s an emphasis on ‘women’s experience’ – in terms of what women suffer in war, the pleasure of working with other women, and the particular qualities women can observably contribute, through a distinctive discourse and process, to the anti-war movement.

But there is simultaneously a gender analysis, expressed clearly by Indira in the Public Library group, and Naomi in the Union Square group, that clearly contradicts the essentialist notions sometimes invoked by the term ‘women’. I asked Indira, do you feel more comfortable with the term ‘violence against women’, or ‘gender-based violence’? She answered ‘The latter, because that’s what it is in theory, if we’re analysing it as social constructionists. At bottom, it’s not male or female. It’s an issue of power, and power is more often associated with masculinity than femininity. But,’ she added, ‘*violence against women does reflect a certain reality.*’

I would add that invoking women’s experience is not to invoke women’s ‘nature’, and it is often precisely what enables us to reach women on the

street. It's holding on to that reality (gender-specific experience) that enables the Public Library group (likewise our group in London) to articulate a woman-specific message concerning violence against women in war, without feeling they are at all at risk of doing 'motherhood' or other unproductive kinds of 'womanist' politics.

Naomi takes a less compromising position on this and is critical of groups that fall into the 'all-women-are-peaceful thing'. Like Indira, of the Public Library group, she much prefers the term gender-based violence. The feminism she feels comfortable with 'has a more multifaceted analysis, about multiple axes of repression and how they interact.' She's seen this divergence in the women's movement since way back in the eighties, in the peace camps at nuclear bases, and in the universities, where it's expressed as a split between feminist theory and queer theory, women's studies and gender studies.

Naomi brings together a strong gender analysis with an anti-militarist analysis. She observes that organizing around a problem defined as 'war' leaves groups open (unfortunately) to a masculine politics – even to militarist expressions of masculinity. By contrast, once you adopt an anti-militarist perspective (opening up to recognizing the links between militarism, nationalism and male dominance) a gender critique is logically inevitable.

Interestingly, this analysis shapes (and flows from) choices concerning action. Whereas for the Public Library group the question of whether one is gay or straight is immaterial, it leads Naomi (and the Union Square group) to a political imperative of gender/queer politics and alliances with men. 'I feel the most sophisticated gender commentaries on militarism aren't coming from WiB – they're more kind of hybrid, feminist-and-queer... Through the connection with JATO, the Thursday vigil has indirect ties to a queer sensibility that the Wednesday vigil doesn't. It's because of these organizational alliances, and also because we allow men, and because we're not silent. It opens doors.'

Like light on water

Several women I spoke to in the New York groups said to me 'I wish you could have spoken with so-and-so'. I *am* very aware that each additional interview I might have made with other members of these two WiBs would have subtly shifted my perspective on them.

Also, the passage of time brings changes. Often things happen in a group, or are done in a certain way, because a particular person is active at a given moment. Women enter into activity and withdraw for a while, then come back again. For instance, Stephanie Damoff, whose communication skills have been so important to the Public Library group, is away writing her thesis just now. Julie and others have stepped in to substitute, putting their own particular mark on the process.

As Pat says, 'Women in Black is a bit like light on water, hard to grasp and hold onto. It's a growing organism that's hard to define. If you were to return to

visit us again in a year, I wonder...’ So my warning to the reader of this Profile is: don’t allow me to mislead you into seeing any of this as fixed or definitive!

CONTACTS

I was three nights in New York, enjoying very much staying with Indira Kajosevic, talking morning and night while she fed her baby son Tin Aragorn. In her Upper Manhattan apartment I felt I was in the New York I’d always imagined, faces of every colour on the busy pavements, subway trains thundering by underfoot. Thanks Indira!

I had individual or group interviews with Anne Wangh, Judy Solomon, Lila Braine, Melissa Jameson, Naomi Braine and Sherry Gorelick, of the Union Square group; Julie Finch, Indira Kajosevic and Pat De Angelis of the Public Library group. Thank you all very much for generously giving me your time and putting your minds to my questions.

This profile has been carefully read by all the above, and I have tried faithfully to implement all the suggestions they made for improving it. It remains my own perception, of course. But the women involved confirm they feel comfortable with my rendering of their realities, and that this profile may appear on the Website.

Should you wish to get in touch with the two groups described here, please contact them as follows:

New York Union Square Women in Black

E-mail address: WIB_thurs.yahoo.com

website: www.womeninblackunionsq.org

New York Public Library Women in Black

Contact Stephanie Damoff: e-mail address: 074182@newschool.edu

Web mistress Katarina Ceman: kceman@lhric.org

website: <http://womeninblack.net>

Women in Black Archive

At the New York Public Library

Archivist: Melanie Yolles

E-mail: myolles@nypl.org

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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