

All-women peace societies

The Congress of Women opened in April, 1915 in the Hague. About twelve hundred women, chiefly suffragists from western countries, both "enemy" and neutral, succeeded in attending. Flush with some of the best known radicals of the day, the meeting aimed for the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means and the suffrage of women. A Canadian professor at the University of Wisconsin, Julia Grace Wales, refined a plan to undertake continuous mediation ("shuttle diplomacy" today) to end the war. They were well-received by prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs, the Pope and the King of Norway, but they were usually told that it was not time for negotiations; the war must run itself out. Still, they proceeded to establish a permanent peace organization, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which exists to this day. Bruna Nota, a member of Canadian Voice of Women for Peace, is the current president.

Nevertheless, the isolation of women from the political mainstream remained, and one can speculate about its relationship to the continuing tyranny of man's oldest profession, but not on its blight on democracy the world over. Forty-five years after the creation of the WILPF, this persistent exclusion propelled the Canadian Voice of Women (or VOW) for Peace on to the Canadian landscape. In its visit to Parliament that year, it asked Canada to declare itself a non-nuclear country and urge the U.S.A. to stop atmospheric nuclear testing. The Voice of Women's appearance aroused derision in some hostile quarters, reflected in letters to the editor, but the movement held to its course.

The Progressive Conservative government of John Diefenbaker told the VOW to "go home and organize". Thousands of women were drawn to the movement, including Maryon Pearson, whose husband "Mike" was then Leader of the Liberal Party and Leader of the Opposition. Immensely capable women such as Thérèse Casgrain, Kay Macpherson and Grace Hartman became leaders of the movement. Forty years later, operating on a shoestring, VOW's peace volunteer and voluminous peace work continues, from Burnt Church to Burundi.

Women lobby for demilitarized, "true" security

In 1962, the VOW convened an International Conference of Women to consider what could be done about the nuclear threat. From this came a request to the UN for an International Year of Peace (later proclaimed as International Cooperation Year in 1965) and a request to the Canadian government for Canada to support the international appeal for a nuclear test ban treaty. In 1985, VOW member Marion Kerans coordinated a Women's International Peace Conference marking the end of the United Nations Decade for Women. Three hundred and fifty women from around the world came to Halifax to discuss true security and women's alternatives for negotiating peace. At the Peace Tent in Nairobi, Margaret Fulton, president of Mount Saint Vincent University delivered the powerful statement from the Halifax conference.