



# Women's role in the peace movement FROM PAST TO PRESENT

by Martha Muzychka  
of Canadian University Press

In June 1985, more than 300 women from Canada and around the world met at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax to discuss peace-making from a woman's point of view. The conference upheld the belief that women have developed ways of resolving conflict through logic and understanding of everyone's need for a peaceful existence instead of the traditional male view of violence and fear as peacekeeping efforts.

For some women, everything they work for is connected to creating a more egalitarian, peaceful and co-operative existence. While there are numerous examples of war-mongering women, such as Margaret Thatcher or Golda Meir, feminists say women have always been involved in peace work. The growth of women's peace camps, mothers' petitions for peace and increasing use of civil disobedience have brought women's role in the peace movement to the forefront.

As early as 416 B.C., the Greek playwright Aristophanes was writing about a woman peace worker who organized and united the women of warring Greek states in the cause of peace.

Lysistrata convinced the Greek women to organize a marital strike against their husbands and lovers, and not give in to their sexual demands until the men had stopped fighting and restored peace to Greece.

Almost 2000 years later, in 1590, Indian women of the Hotinon Sionne Iroquois Confederacy gathered at what is now Seneca Falls, New York to discuss strategies for ending the war among the Iroquois nations.

Seneca Falls was also the site of the first women's rights conference in 1848 when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony linked suffrage and peace as goals for women.

(In 1983, Seneca Falls was the site of a women's peace camp. Women protested the arms race at the Seneca Falls Army Depot between July 4 and Labour Day. There was a mass demonstration in August and over 300 women were arrested.)

Women's link with peace and feminism

could be said to have begun in the nineteenth century with abolitionists. Women like Sarah and Angela Grimke worked toward the abolition of slavery, and then turned to other concerns such as suffrage, prostitution, infant mortality and other issues of "maternal feminism".

Women's first attempts to enter the public sphere — man's domain — had to be centred on good works relating to women's place in the home. Their role as wife and mother, educator of the future leaders of society permitted them to deal with some of the sordid aspects of life — alcohol abuse, child labour, and slum neighbourhoods, for example.

The Quakers or Society of Friends did much to link women and peace together. This religious sect was pacifist in belief and many of the Quaker women were permitted to speak about their beliefs to mixed groups. Many of the nineteenth century suffragists were Quakers and they were respected for their efforts toward abolition and in speaking out against the Civil War.

In Europe, women were also becoming active in the peace movement, because their countries were so often the theatres for war. In 1854, the first of many women's peace leagues was organized. An Austrian woman, Berthe Von Suttner, wrote a book *Lay Down Your Arms*, which discussed the horrors of war. Von Suttner lectured throughout Europe and in 1905 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The most prominent reason for women's involvement in peace work was their concern for children. The appeal to mother's love and women's "inherent" peaceful nature led the push for Julia Ward Howe's efforts to declare an international mother's day for peace.

Howe had been a Civil War nurse who had cared for the wounded, while witnessing the deaths of hundreds of young men. Howe wanted all women to join together in preventing war because "(mothers) of one country will be too tender of those in another country to allow our sons to injure theirs."

On June 2, 1872, Howe was successful in getting her Mother's Day. But through the years, the original intent was lost as Mother's Day became a day to honor women's contributions to maintain their families' love and comfort.

But some women organised peace groups as a means of creating political change. Suffrage associations linked peace with their efforts for the women's vote. If women had the vote, suffragists reasoned, they would be able to participate in world affairs and thus influence governments toward peaceful co-existence.

Peace was seen as women's responsibility, because men made war. In 1903, John Ruskin said women were morally responsible for war because "not that you have provoked it, but in that you have not hindered."

In the pre-war tensions of the turn of the 20th century, women were very concerned about the possibility of war. At a meeting of socialists/feminists in 1912, women were told to raise their children in a non-militaristic environment. Clara Zetken believed a peaceful future could be ensured by teaching children peaceful ways. She was supported by German feminists who had already noted the effect their militaristic society had upon the idea of peace.

These feminists had also noted how women were treated in German society and how the attitudes of the men controlled the progress of female emancipation. Women would have to gain political freedom first, these German suffragists said, if conditions were ever going to improve. Women would make a better world as men were responsible for the current mess of world affairs.

With the First World War many suffragists were divided. Many were pressed to leave the suffragist fight to support their country's effort to battle a bigger enemy. Other women refused to let the concern for the vote be lost, and used the war as another example of why women should vote and be involved in politics.

## "Women can work together in the face of the greatest War in the World"

In *Women Against War*, a Toronto feminist/suffragist/peace activist, Flora MacDonald Dennison, wrote "this war is the most conclusive argument that has ever blazed its electric message across the sky of human consciousness in favor of political equality." Dennison was opposed to the

war, and like many other women was accused of being unpatriotic and disloyal to her country.

But some women thought there might be other ways of helping their countries by finding ways of stopping the killing in Europe. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) organized an International Congress of Women to discuss ways of bringing peace and preventing future wars. The regular meeting of the IWSA had to be cancelled after members in Germany cancelled their invitation to hold thought there had to be another way of meeting and calling attention to women's role in peacemaking.

"Just because there is this terrible war, the women must come together somewhere, some way, just to show that women of all countries can work together even in the face of the greatest war in the world," Jacobs told Crystal Eastman, founder of the Woman's Peace Party. "Women must show that when all of Europe seems full of hatred, they can remain united."

In April 1915, over 1500 women from 12 different countries met at The Hague to propose peaceful ways of ending the war particularly through constant mediation. Some of the delegates later reported that the media were waiting for some "incident" to occur to discredit the women's efforts. Women were able to cross enemy lines — German women spoke with Belgian delegates — to discuss in friendship their concerns while their brothers were shooting at each other. Some countries weren't permitted to attend, such as France and England, because of the problems with transportation.

An unofficial Canadian delegate, Julia Grace Wales, and a Hungarian delegate, Rosika Schwimer, proposed an international panel of experts from neutral countries be set up for the duration of the war. The members of this panel would develop ways of negotiating peace and mediating with belligerent countries until mutually agreeable terms were established.

In the two weeks following the congress, two dozen women visited 14 countries to get support for this proposal. Their idea was quashed by the American president Woodrow Wilson, who told the women he wanted to wait for the right moment to act. In 1917, the United States decided to enter the war, and the panel was "buried".

In the meantime an International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (ICWPP) was set up. The group promoted the idea of peace through mediation, women's rights and education campaigns about the war. The women's activities received mostly negative responses from the world leaders. The women themselves were often vilified in the press. Jane Addams, the chairwoman of the Hague Congress and a key organizer of the ICWPP, was most often accused of being mentally incompetent, a common enough insult for women then, and an effort made to discredit the whole movement as "maid".

Both Addams and another delegate, Emily Greene Balch, became the first president and executive secretary respectively, of a reconstituted women's peace group, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Most of its principles were the same as the ICWPP, which was trying to end the present war. The WILPF would carry on the promotion of peace but it also took an active role in the development of the League of Nations.

Another women's conference took place in 1919 in Zurich, Switzerland. The organizers had originally planned to hold it at the same time as talks for the Treaty of Versailles were scheduled but could not. The French government would not permit delegates from defeated countries to enter.

The conference studied the terms of the Versailles treaty and immediately condemned it for its harsh treatment of Germany. The women said the treaty violated the basic principles on which lasting peace could be built by allowing secret diplomacy, denying self-determination, divid-