

WILPF Congress 2017

27 to 30th July, Chicago, Illinois



Attended the WILPF Congress at Chicago thanks to the scholarship by Jane Addam's Peace Association

The first few hours after reaching the metropolitan city of Chicago were spent on the bus touring the city, courtesy the vibrant team of WILPF women that organized the 4 day event. The city is now home to many different small communities of people from around the world. Our very knowledgeable tour guide told us that Chicago is a hyper segregated society where people of different ethnicities live in their own small neighborhoods. There are Jewish, Irish, Polish, Italian, Lithuanian, Hispanic, Indian and yes Chinese people thriving in the fast paced commercial hub.

The industries and factories that dominate the by-lanes of Chicago have been there for a very long time. And still more, it seems, are being built as is evident from the construction that you see after every 800 meters.

A different type of construction was on the agenda of many strong women who had gathered together yet again for the WILPF US Congress 2017. The construction of a more just, a more humane and a more inclusive society. The organization that has been around for over a hundred

years has been working for peace and freedom, following on the footsteps of the Nobel Laureate Jane Addams.



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An opportunity to hear the views of many different women that are working to create a better society made this an incredible experience for me. These were women that have mostly lived an emancipated life in a country that is considered the largest democracy in the world. Coming from a country and a society that still has a long way to go before it reaches anywhere close to equality, this was a real eye opener.

The US Wilpf President, Mary Hansen Harrison inspired all to “Rise Up” as she welcomed all to the congress.

Must say, the speakers did rise to the occasion as they talked fearlessly on various topics and inspired those like me in the audi-

The most impressive part of all the speakers that shared their views was, that they had no inhibitions in criticizing the system and its flaws. Unlike in India, which is a more hypocritical society where people do not usually say what they see and feel.

The first plenary 'Peace, Protest and Policy: Women Waging Peace', had some very important observations made by the speakers on why we do not need wars.

Phyllis Bennis made an important observation, which is that wars are actually illegal. She said, "Under what authority is the United States waging war on other countries". She emphasized on the futility of war, and said that most people actually do not want wars and they happen only "when war triumphs over diplomacy".

She ended with a powerful quote by Martin Luther King Jr, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice".

The second speaker Kathy Kelly was equally impressive and reminisced a time in the life of Jane Addams when she visited the soldiers of World War I. She said the soldiers confided in Addams that they could only continue with the war after taking higher doses of rum and opium to handle the horror of a useless battle.

The evening was lit up by some heartwarming music by the band "Voices".

The songs of peace and love for all mixed with the enthusiasm of all band members had the audience cheering and singing along. A beautiful day had come to an end but there was more in store in the remaining days of the congress.

In the next few days, I heard many a speakers in different workshops that were lined up during the day.

The morning plenary had a big crowd cheering for peace after the inspirational speech by Larry Spivack, the President of the Illinois Labor History Society.

I attended the Food Sovereignty workshop that discussed the ill effects of going the GMO way. WILPF US president, Mary Hansen showed with figures how corporates like Monsanto are constantly taking over agriculture sidestepping the small farmers. The woman farmer from IOWA, Patti Naylor, spoke of the problems of the US farmers and how lower interest rates are pushing those in the fields to suicide. While Shilpa Pandey from India, spoke of the issues at the grassroots level in countries like India. The Wilpf Viewpoint,

“ Say No to corporates taking over farms”.

The very interesting workshop that saw many wilpfers in attendance was the Creative Communication workshop by Candace Perry, Janet Fitch and Anne Hoiberg. I appreciated the documentary by Janet Fitch, which was made with a lot of heart and hardwork. This was a film about 'Most Dangerous Women' of WILPF, named as such at one time for their marches against world war.

An interesting reading session from the book, 'Most Dangerous Women', bringing history to life through reader's theater by Jan Maher, had the whole group participating. The whole discussion answered a vital question - how can art and creative communication influence the building of a better society?

The workshop by Barbara Taft on the issues in the middle east was important for me to attend since I come from a country close to that region. I felt responsible to know and become aware of the goings on in that part of the world. The main points that the Middle East committee decided it will continue to do.

1. Campaign to get Hamas removed from the U.S. list of terrorist organizations
2. Work on achieving a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East.
3. Campaign to stop the arms sales to Saudi Arabia, as they are being used against civilians in Yemen

The enthusiastic committee of middle east also decided to examine the possibility of a delegation to Iran, to get first hand report and perhaps a film.

The plenary of Chicago Activist Panel consisting of Olga Bautista, Mary Dean, Jeanette Hernandez and Pam Smith was quite a revelation on the infamous crime scene in the black dominated areas of Chicago. The powerful women of action shared about what they are doing to inspire and motivate the younger lot in these difficult communities. They brainstormed on things that can be done to mainstream the next generation so they give up on things they have grown up with.

The evening walking tour to the Hull House was another highlight of the event. A part of the house that was once home to many different immigrants from around the world, is maintained with furniture, artifacts and some other personal belongings of Jane Addams from her time. The Indian social activist, Sarojini Naidu's picture on the first floor of the house reminded me of the pioneers of activism in my own country.

The final day of the congress had finally arrived and I could not help feeling how these past few days had gone by so quickly, meeting and listening, to so many powerful and self motivated women.

The US WILPF President, Mary Hanson Harrison with her core team of people addressed everyone, one by one, in the finale breakfast. She stressed on the importance of staying on agenda of Rise Up! Reclaim! and Reimagine!

The generous side of women Wilpfers came out when many joined in to contribute monetarily to the WILPF fund.

WILPF (Women's
International league for
Peace and Freedom)

Jane Addam's
Peace
Association

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I hope WILPF continues with its great work and continues to sponsor and support women like me from developing countries, helping them find newer perspectives.

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