

From: Altaira Hatton, Oakland, CA

I see WILPF as an identity group. Who are we? We are women and men creating a better world. A world where conflict can be addressed without war. A world where a person's rights and freedoms are not determined by the perception of their sex. A world where basic needs for survival are met. A world where through hard work and careful planning, peace becomes our natural equilibrium. Some of us see that achieved by creating and nurturing policy, some of us do that by holding vigils, and protests to highlight injustice. Some of us do that by opening local women's shelters and after school programs. We are not one thing; we are a summary of our parts, and our parts vary as much as our languages, the color of our skin, and our dreams for the future.

It's difficult to create a single vision out of parts. How do we support our protesters, while not ignoring our social workers? How do we allocate funds so that women from all of our member groups can find support and inspiration in each other by attending conferences, not just those with the means to do so? How can we draft policy which reflects the wishes of so many? How do we address the will, and the infrastructure needed to achieve and maintain peace?

WILPF began as a response to war. By focusing on peace as an alternative to the crisis of WWI, a focus, and rallying point was established. Our goals were relatively clear; the end to an encompassing war, and the establishment for a foundation of peace between the involved nations. The women involved were primarily from countries affected, and they had a vested and personal interest in the agreed upon result.

As the world's leaders understood the public mandate for peace, our role grew. And as we aligned ourselves with the mission and work of the United Nations, our reach grew. We transformed from a group of 1100 hundred women to an organization with branches in 37 countries, and a humbling reputation as the foremost authority on international women's rights.

Change, like age, creeps up on one slowly. We are now longer living in Jane Adams' world. The threat of European war is nearly unthinkable. The United States is no longer in a position to claim moral leadership. The world's population has increased dramatically, from an estimated 1.8 billion in 1910, to 7 billion today. Our most spoken languages are Mandarin and Spanish, and Europe has gone from holding roughly 25% of the world's population to just under 11%. Our territorial conflicts are primarily in Africa, while civil unrest and violence are reoccurring themes world wide. Economic scarcity, disease, nuclear contamination and a stranglehold on trade are some of the new weapons of war, as are non-targeted bombings and water shortage.

The conflicts we must address today are not, for the most part, those of organized military on declared battlefields. We are not facing a world at war, but we are facing a world of wars. The obstacles to peace which our members confront can be understood by the umbrella of our mission statement, but they must be addressed individually, and often locally.

"True peace is not merely the absence of war, it is the presence of justice."

"In his own way each man must struggle, lest the moral law become a far-off abstraction utterly separated from his active life."

— Jane Addams

I believe that as an organization, we must look at how the work of our members supports our mission, and we must find a multitude of ways to support that work. We are in a unique position to provide support, exposure and networking to women and men around the world. Should we chose, we could become the most relevant organization for social progress in the world.

To be perfectly frank, that's not the direction I've seen us heading in. In the US particularly, we have an aging membership, and have not remained relevant to the needs of our youth and quickly growing immigrant populations. An anecdote from my personal experience is that my former local WILPF branch opted to hold our monthly board meetings during weekday afternoons at a retirement center. When I asked for them to be held on the weekend or evenings, as I worked 9–5, I was told by the chair that WILPF wasn't an organization for young, working women or mothers, it was something women could look forward to doing in retirement. Needless to say I did not continue to be active with that local branch, though I had previously chaired the disarmament committee and represented WILPF at the pre-Iraq war protest organizing meetings in Portland, Oregon.

A second relevant anecdote comes from my experiences at the Swedish international conference in 2004. Our "Young WILPF" group ranged in age from 18 to 30. While the concept of a youth contingent is lovely, including a woman of thirty implies geriatric status is the norm.

I travel often, and internationally. Despite relying on a power wheelchair for mobility, I've found myself wandering from South America to Nepal. And when I could, I met with the local WILPF branch or members. We are a delightful,

diverse group of women doing amazing things. However, we lack cohesion, and many members feel isolated or left out by means of geography. While all of us shared a huge admiration and respect for WILPF's history and accomplishments, a common vision and sense of belonging was quite rare, especially outside of Europe.

I'm sure you'd rather that I had continued my essay in a flattering tone. I probably should have. But you see, I've kept my involvement with WILPF for the last ten years, though at times loosely, because despite not finding a way to bring new life to this grand matriarch of organizations, I've always been bothered by the idea that it could be done, and is worth doing.

"Nothing can be worse than the fear that one had given up too soon and left one unexpended effort which might have saved the world."

— Jane Addams