

WOMEN IN BLACK

**AGAINST VIOLENCE,
FOR PEACE WITH JUSTICE**

**CYNTHIA COCKBURN
and SUE FINCH**

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FOREWORD

This book tells the story of Women in Black and explains why it is important: how a network of women committed to peace with justice grew to oppose injustice, war, militarism and other forms of violence across the world and actively speak truth to power.

Women in Black (WiB) is not an organisation, but a formula for action. Reflecting on the inherent violence of militarised patriarchy over the years, the actions and the bravery of these women have inspired many generations in their determined resistance to the continuum of male violence and its ramifications.

Cynthia Cockburn from Women in Black in London started writing this book in 2018 but sadly died in 2019 before she could complete it. Some women from the UK completed the remaining chapters, adding many more stories from across the world. But the movement is continually evolving, and we can only apologise if there are WiB groups and events that have been missed.

Building on the work and aspirations of previous generations, their stand — and their critique — has spread from country to country and continues to develop in different ways in over sixty countries.

This is a history of a movement that must be acknowledged, and preserved, to continue to inspire future generations working against violence, and for peace and justice.



Cynthia Cockburn demonstrating against nuclear weapons at Faslane in Scotland, 2006
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INTRODUCTION

In February 2019, Cynthia Cockburn wrote:

I have been invited by members of the network to write a history of Women in Black and describe the present reality. The objective of such a book is to further our cause — in brief, to eliminate violence against women and to end militarism and war. We believe that the book will help to make Women in Black (WiB) better known, disseminate its message and attract more adherents. Another objective is to re-state and advance feminist understandings of gender in relation to violence and war.

WiB is already over thirty years old. People pass away and memories fade. It is important to gather and present the historical material before it is too late.

Rape, femicide and the social exploitation of women are endemic. Feminist activism to end gendered oppression and violence is urgent and will be strengthened by fostering a greater understanding of the masculinist and patriarchal nature of militarism and war, and making the scope and extent of current movements for change better known.

Outbreaks of armed conflict are frequent worldwide, between states, and between governments and their opponents. Recently, besides, the threat of armed violence within countries between groups of opposed ideologies, identities and cultures is increasing.

Global military spending — currently more than two trillion dollars a year — is steadily growing. Massive national military budgets squander resources that could and should be spent on people's health and wellbeing. It is urgent to give information about ways of protesting against this and drawing more citizens into activism.

It is also urgent that men adopt, and women support, forms of masculinity that are not shaped by violence and militarism.

Cynthia Cockburn wrote this introduction in February 2019 but died on 12 September 2019 before she finished the book. In the meantime, she wrote five chapters. Given the outbreak of yet more armed conflict in Israel Palestine, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Armenia and elsewhere in 2022, and ever-growing rape statistics across the world, her introduction feels more urgent, and even more relevant, now.

Just before she died, Cynthia asked me to finish the book, gave me the first five chapters and handed over 20 box files of information to include in the remaining two chapters: one on WiB UK, and one on WiB Armenia. As a result, the style of these two chapters had to change from the personal, fascinating narrative of the original five to more collective accounts. Cynthia was a wonderful writer of many books, so this was a daunting task. Luckily, WiB from across the world added their stories, helped to check what was already written for accuracy and contributed to this book.

Women in Black acts across five continents for peace and justice and against violence, militarism and war. WiB's most consistent action is the street-side vigil, positioned at a busy location and repeated at regular intervals. Vigillars wear black, mostly maintain silence and display boldly worded political messages.

Many WiB take more direct action too, demonstrating against war, militarism, murder and rape, using imaginative street theatre and blocking roads that lead to nuclear testing and bomb assembly sites.

WiB has different names in different countries and contexts, depending on the particular focus of the local group: Women in Black against War, Women in Black against Violence and Women in Black for Peace with Justice. We are not an organisation, but a network connected by an international website, international conferences and shared theories, inspiration and actions.

Characteristic and particularly influential country groups of WiB feature in this book, which recounts unique developments, dramatic events and key personalities:

Chapter 1 tells how Women in Black began in Israel in 1988, prompted by the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, of late 1987, with an appeal to ‘End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza’. This chapter begins with the conflictual relationship between the state of Israel and Palestinians in its historical context, and the inequality and injustice of gender relations in highly militarised Israel Palestine. We see WiB evolving a complex and productive partnership of Jewish Israeli women with Israeli Palestinian women and Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories.

Chapter 2 has three distinct parts, as we see WiB getting under way in the countries to which it first spread:

In the USA, only six months after women in Jerusalem enacted their first WiB vigil, Jewish women peace activists began mounting similar actions in US towns and cities. We trace the rapid and effective development of the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (JWCEO) and growth of WiB in the USA.

- a. Italian feminist activists first made contact with WiB in the late eighties when visiting Israel Palestine in the context of a project they called ‘Visiting Difficult Places’. We see how they joined Israeli WiB in peace actions and, on returning home, began vigils in Rome, Perugia and other cities under the name *Donne in Nero* (DiN). The chapter draws on a survey DiN carried out, which generated thoughtful reflections by Italian women on the meaning of silence and wearing black.