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Gather 'Round the Peace Table

By *Laura Roskos*

Since the dismantling of the President's Interagency Council on Women in 2001 and the downsizing of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, there has been no official means of convening U.S. women on a national scale. As a result, women as a constituency and women's interests become pawns in electoral debates whose victors cannot be held accountable to the promises they have made. But this upcoming election year, we don't have to let the politicians set the terms of the debate on Iraq, nuclear weapons, national sovereignty, or the environment.

Last fall, WILPF's Advancing Human Rights Committee launched A Women's Agenda to Prevent War, a project aimed at reaching out to other women, and other women's organizations, in the spirit of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325. Our goal is to develop a locally rooted and nationally coordinated policy agenda reflecting the concerns and hopes of women across the United States.

To that end, we're calling on WILPF members to reach out to their neighbors this fall — across party, ethnic, religious, and class lines — to convene Peace Tables in their communities where women can come together and hammer out their own priorities and blueprints for governing this country. The Global Task Force of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Women's Alternatives for New Directions (WAND), the Feminist Peace Network, and Peacemakers, Inc. are joining WILPF in this effort.

Preventing war rests on the twin cornerstones of protecting women's human rights and maximizing women's political power. Women's political empowerment, in the context of accountability to a participatory women's

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Advancing Human Rights Committee members with Jackie Witherspoon at the U.N. CEDAW sessions this past July. *Left to right: Terri deLangis, Jackie Witherspoon, Tzili Mor, Laura Roskos.*

movement, will ultimately protect the full range of women's human rights by preventing future wars. Comparative studies by UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security on the implementation of SCR 1325 have shown that transformative change through women's political empowerment can be hastened by a robust and inclusive women's agenda, autonomous of existing political parties. Autonomy from partisan politics means this agenda can serve as a resource for politicians within every party, while simultaneously staking a claim for goals and objectives that might remain beyond any single party's platform. U.S. women have not shared such an agenda since the Platform for Action, developed through a series of regional prepcoms (pre-conference meetings) and adopted at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The campaigns for the 2008 presidential elections are already in full swing, and the time has never been better to reconnect with the women in your community. WILPF has developed a toolkit with sample materials you can use in organizing and facilitating a local Peace Table gathering. Members of WILPF's Advancing Human Rights committee are available by phone and e-mail to coach you through the process and may be able to help you locate speakers or audiovisual aids to enhance the experience. The timeliness of your actions matters, however, as we hope to compile the findings of these Peace Tables into a candidates' questionnaire and voters' guide by next spring.

To get started, contact Terri deLangis at tdelangis@comcast.net or Laura Roskos at masscedaw@yahoo.com for more information and/or email Kate Zaidan at kzaidan@wilpf.org to obtain your toolkit today.

Laura Roskos is the co-chair of the Advancing Human Rights Issue Committee.