

WILPF's Role in Advancing Human Rights at Home

Laura Roskos

As a women's peace organization, WILPF pre-dates the codification of human rights in international law. Human rights law, with its emphasis on protecting the freedoms of belief and expression, is often understood as protecting "the natural rights of man" by limiting the extent to which governments can interfere in the self-determination of individuals. But human rights law also asserts a slate of positive responsibilities for governments. These are first enumerated in Articles 55 and 56 of the Charter of the United Nations



In her work at Hull House in Chicago, Jane Addams learned that people needed to have their basic human needs met before they could participate in "a vigorous civic life," including free elections.

as "taking joint and separate action" to "promote higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development . . . without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion."

In her writings on municipal government, completed mostly in the years immediately preceding what has become known as the Progressive Era in U.S. history, WILPF co-founder Jane Addams repeatedly expresses concern about the inability of municipal govern-

ments to adapt their institutions to the conditions of modern urban life, specifically their inability to devise the means by which to "receive" the talents and cultural assets of their newly arrived immigrant residents. "We have," she wrote, "a municipal administration in America which concerns itself only grudgingly with the social needs of people, and is largely reduced to the administration of restrictive measures." An evolving, robust democracy, she believed, would take a different attitude.

BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

When WILPF members in Pajaro Valley (CA), New York City and Pittsburgh (PA) work to establish single-payer universal health plans in their communities, they are working to develop

the human rights infrastructure envisioned by Addams. They are also fostering her vision of an adaptive, expansive democracy able to welcome and embrace the energies, wisdom, and talents of all who come under its sway. Two years ago, when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania issued its findings pursuant to its adoption of House Resolution 144 recognizing economic human rights, it forcefully noted that "adequate and affordable housing, adequate and affordable health care, adequate clothing and nutrition and quality education. . . are rights and not products available only to those who can afford them." Furthermore, the report goes on to note that while the state invests an adequate sum (approximately \$23 million) toward meeting its human rights obligations, "access is often impeded when policy and program requirements for one service renders an individual ineligible for another critically needed service."

Addams understood that for the transplanted Poles, Italians, and Bohemians she met and interacted with daily at Hull House in Chicago, protection — in the form of meeting basic human needs — was integral to their full participation in a "vigorous civic life," including free elections. People in bondage to their employers or to their ward boss could not cast their votes freely. Nor were they truly free to re-weave the social fabric of clan and place ripped by migration into a "cosmopolitan bond" of mutual assistance and accountability among their similarly displaced neighbors. The institutions of elected office and legislative bodies put in place by the revolutionary forefathers were moribund, Addams observed, if they could not foster the participation of all and fostering such participation required attentiveness to the development and support of embodied human beings.

When WILPF members work within the United Nations structures or with post-conflict governments on full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325, they are practicing the double-movement of protection and empowerment advocated by Addams for advancing human rights. SCR 1325 reminds the Security Council of the interdependence of economic, social, cultural and civil and political rights written into the U.N. Charter itself, and is explicit about steps to be taken both to protect and to empower women in post-conflict situations. In this way, SCR 1325 builds on the wisdom of Recommendation 19 to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and moves this wisdom across the institutional barriers of the United Nations to a specific application. But this work within the body of the U.N. would not take hold if it were not part of a larger strategy based on popular education and local implementation initiatives.

Human rights is, in large measure, what WILPFers do in

advancing the possibilities for sustainable peace where ever we find ourselves. Nevertheless, the urgency of doing this work escalates daily. In order to meet this challenge, we must work more effectively, more self-consciously, in a way that both strengthens the United Nations and fosters solidarity with social justice organizations who are our potential allies in this work.

FULL PARTICIPATION

There are two principles that WILPF's Advancing Human Rights Committee believes are key.

First, recognize the complex diversity within yourself as your greatest asset in doing human rights work. None of us inhabit only one identity; rather we live at the intersection of several identities, some advantaged and others disadvantaged economically, legally, socially, or otherwise. Full participation in the human rights culture we hope to build requires that each of us understand and use our privilege as well as our oppression as sources of insight and leverage. To understand oneself in terms of either/or leads to categorizing others as either us or them, and according to Addams, sustains vestiges of mili-

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tarism in society. Militarism persists whenever a few presume to rule the many through repression and control. This she saw as antithetical to the democratic spirit which demands that we create and re-create institutions of self-governance inclusive of all.

However, this does not mean that we are all the same. Nor does it mean that we can't or shouldn't hone particular skills in advancing human rights. The wordsmith who can draft a flyer bringing hundreds to a public rally may not also be capable of drafting a compelling legal brief in defense of the human right to marry a partner of the same sex or defining the human rights to adequate housing. The advocate who can persuade a member of a U.N. treaty body to publicly address a certain human rights violation may not also be able to ferret out and document the violation in its local manifestation. Yet all these abilities are necessary to the success of this work. Respecting the diversity in ourselves also means recognizing our limits, and can be a necessary first step to respecting the

specific skills and competencies of others. It can help us build bridges across distance and across professional boundaries. It is essential to building bridges with other social justice organizations.

The second principle is to insist on connecting the dots. As more and more of us have less and less to lose, we should insist on what some will tell us is impossible, the whole, integrated bundle of human rights. Recent critical histories of both second wave feminism and the U.S. civil rights movement have focused on the compromises each made to open up access to social institutions such as elected office, higher education, and professional employment. While striving to break the glass ceiling of achievement for the few, neither movement succeeded in establishing a floor of social benefits for the many. Taking shape against the backdrop of the Great Society programs and general respect for the benefits yielded by the New Deal, movement leaders could not have anticipated the steady erosion of public supports for social institutions like schools, libraries, subway systems, immunizations, etc., that we've observed over the past 25 years, nor the more recently accelerated looting of the federal treasury.

In August, the Geneva-based Human Rights Committee solicited U.S.-based civil society for information regarding the infringements of civil liberties occurring under the U.S. Patriot Act; in their carefully researched response, the responding coalition of organizations asked the HRC to intervene on behalf of a much broader range of human rights violations being promulgated by the current administration. If we resist the seduction of "small wins" and insist on what Addams calls "the right to locally determine the scope of local government in response to needs as they arise," we will find many allies.

This issue of *Peace and Freedom* is brimming with practical ideas and projects for building human rights accountability structures in our local communities. We hope that they will inspire you to create materials addressing local concerns through a human rights lens, to make alliances with other groups defending human rights in your area, to document and report human rights violations suffered by your neighbors and acquaintances, to integrate the language of human rights into your daily conversations and into local ordinances and state legislation. Let us know what works and what doesn't. The Advancing Human Rights Issues committee is here to support you in your efforts, wherever they lead.

Laura Roskos is co-chair of the Massachusetts CEDAW Project (www.masscedaw.org), a participatory research collaborative dedicated to infusing human rights standards and process values into state law and policy, and chair of WILPF's Advancing Human Rights Issues Committee. In 2005 she was elected to serve on the board of the U.S. section of WILPF. She can be reached at: masscedaw@yahoo.com.