

Article

The Contribution of Women to Peace in the Middle East: The Experience of the Movement Women Wage Peace (WWP)

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Abstract: In the context of the many movements with a strong female presence promoting peace in the Middle East, the movement Women Wage Peace (WWP) currently represents the largest and most impactful organization in the country. Founded in the aftermath of the 50-day Gaza War/Operation Protective Edge of 2014, Women Wage Peace has grown to 45,000 Israeli members, the most significant grassroots peace movement in Israel today. WWP's theory of change refracts the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and its resolution, through a gendered lens. The movement is non-partisan and does not support any specific solution to the conflict. Instead, it empowers women from diverse communities to build trust across divides, leading to a unified demand for diplomatic negotiation, with full representation of women, to end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. WWP enables very diverse women to unite with the aim of taking their own and their children's futures into their own hands: women from the left, center, and right, young and old, from the center and periphery of the country, religious and secular, Jewish, Arab, Druze, and Bedouin. The movement continues to refine its non-hierarchical structure, distributing its work among thousands of volunteers who serve on regional and/or mission-specific teams, including Government Engagement, Foreign Affairs, Digital Communication, Special Projects, and Strategy.

Keywords: women; peace; interreligious dialogue; interculturality



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1. Introduction

Since its inception in 2014, the *Women Wage Peace* (WWP) movement has attracted a great deal of interest, both for its ability to raise awareness and engage many people on the issue of peace in the Middle East and for its determination to propose women's leadership for the running of the country at all levels. Even during the lockdown period for the pandemic caused by COVID-19, their action did not stop; it continued through lectures and debates disseminated on various online platforms, and their proposals and activities are often taken up and commented on by the press and media both locally and internationally. The purpose of this article is to present the WWP movement through the testimonies of the women who animate and support it, with special attention to what is published periodically on its website ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023a](#)).

The presence of women is now significant in many organizations working for peace in the Middle East ([Chasan 1991](#); [Dajani 1994](#); [Daniele 2014](#); [Deutsch 1994](#); [Ernudd 2007](#); [Españoli and Dalia 1991](#); [Federici and Angelo 2020](#); [Hassan 1991](#); [Helman 2022](#); [Holt 2003](#); [Knäpper Bohman 2019](#); [Lentin \[1996\] 2007](#); [Mühlbauer 2001](#)). However, in this variegated scenery, the *Women Wage Peace* (WWP) movement currently is Israel's largest and most impactful organization. A broad grassroots movement, it counts tens of thousands of members from the right, the center, and the left of the political spectrum; Jews and Arabs; religious and secular; and from both the center and the more peripheral areas of the country, including women from *kibbutzim* and settlements. It represents a challenge for the future: ending a conflict that has lasted too long and safeguarding the lives of their children.

It is not the purpose of this paper to conduct an analysis of the complex and delicate situation in the Middle East. However, beyond the political issues that we do not intend to address, we recall here the reasons that prompted many women to start a movement aimed at raising awareness and questioning those in power. Their main goal is to make this peace movement known through what it says about itself, using mainly the media. Although it will not be possible to be exhaustive in this regard, we will try to illustrate the main features of a movement that starts with women and seeks to promote women's leadership in the country. From this perspective, we will try to explain why this movement was born, what its main goals are, and which women it involves. We will analyze the reasons behind their decision to promote women's leadership in the management of the country's social, economic and political life. We will then consider the most significant moments of WWP activities: the peace marches, the sit-ins addressed to the Israeli government representatives, the initiatives for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between Israeli and Palestinian women. We will also reflect on some of the reactions to these activities that have emerged among diaspora Jewish communities, which are always very attentive and critical of what is happening in Israel: we will also consider, for this purpose, the comments reported by one of Italy's leading online Jewish journals. Finally, we will show how the presence of this movement is becoming increasingly inclusive and meaningful. Women and men from diverse backgrounds and social groups, including the LGBT+ community, now collaborate in WWP initiatives. In this way, it will be possible to get at least a general idea of the movement's activity and its social impact. To this end, special reference will be made to the information published in the various sections of the official website of the movement itself ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023a](#)), among which their work in the Israeli Parliament is of particular interest ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023h](#)), and by the media that constantly follow their initiatives ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023m](#)).

This article does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of the WWP movement. Instead, the paper seeks to show the relevance of WWP's contribution to the peace process and interreligious dialogue in the Middle East. These women have not only achieved very important results but are, at the same time, determined to continue to work to achieve much more. We will see, in the next few pages, how this movement was born and what are the main dynamics through which it pursues its goals.

2. Birth and Objectives of the Movement

The *Women Wage Peace* (WWP) movement arose in 2014 during Operation "Protective Edge", an Israeli military campaign to counter the shipment of missiles from the Gaza Strip, which, in those days, saw more than 3000 rockets fired by Hamas. During the operation, the victims were numerous and sadly added to those produced by previous similar situations provoking reactions and criticism both locally and internationally ([Kurz and Shlomo 2014](#)).

Tired of seeing their sons and daughters die in terrorist attacks and military defensive operations, a group of women of different political ideas and religions decided to unite to demonstrate against violence and in favor of a non-violent and mutually binding peace agreement recognized and accepted by both sides: Israeli and Palestinian. They chose distinctive colors: white, the symbol of peace; and turquoise, formed by blue and green that recalls both the Israeli and Palestinian flags.

To start making themselves known, in 2014, the original group formed by Israeli and Arab women with Israeli citizenship promoted a train journey to Sderot—the town near the Gaza Strip most affected by Hamas rockets—which was attended by a thousand women dressed in white. In addition to this first trip, they promoted meetings with the population of the various areas of the country to raise awareness of the movement's objectives. These objectives are within the horizon of a "feminine" managed proposal, as stated on the movement's website ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023b](#)):

WWP's theory of change refracts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and its resolution, through a gendered lens. In the words of former US Ambassador Swanee Hunt, «Women tend to have a more holistic view of security, which embraces not just

political sovereignty and military strength, but also economic security, education, and personal safety». The movement is non-partisan and does not support any one specific solution to the conflict. Instead, it empowers women from diverse communities to build trust across divides, leading in turn to a unified demand for diplomatic negotiation, with full representation of women, to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

WWP enables women to unite and take the future of this small place into our own hands—from the political left, center and right, younger, and older women, those from the center of the country and its periphery, religious and secular, Jewish, Arab, Druze and Bedouin. The movement continues to refine its non-hierarchical structure, distributing its work among thousands of volunteers who serve on regional and/or mission-specific teams including Government Engagement, Foreign Affairs, Digital Communication, Special Projects, and Strategy.

To achieve this, since its origins, the WWP movement has tried to maintain management that is as democratic as possible: two co-directors and an administrative manager coordinate local groups of volunteers scattered in every corner of the country and abroad, according to an elective standard that always starts from the grassroots ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023d](#)). Two objectives emerge above all from the ten programmatic points: a negotiated agreement that ends to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the full participation of women in all aspects of the construction of peace and security. The WWP wants to bring about a broad consensus among the entire population, regardless of the different political currents. Thus, they collaborate with all who wish to support this cause—men and women—but maintaining female leadership. They believe that women are the bearers of values and new strategies capable of offering a new look at both a social and political level, as specified in point four of their program ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023c](#)):

Women lead the movement although it is a civil society initiative open to both women and men. We believe that (1) women still remain, generally speaking, a missing cohort in the political arena, (2) that women’s leadership must be actively cultivated, and (3) that women have a unique contribution to make in the creation of public accord and in the processes of negotiation.

In this regard, a petition—which anyone can sign—appears on their website, and it is introduced by the following statement: “We, Palestinian and Israeli women from all walks of life, are united in the human desire for a future of peace, freedom, equality, rights, and security for our children and the next generations”. With this petition, they appeal to political leaders, to all those who believe in peace, but above all, to women: “We call on the women of the world to stand by us for a future of peace and security, prosperity, dignity and freedom for ourselves, our children, and the people of the region” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023e](#)).

Their belief is that it is up to women, seen as the guardians of life, to promote a lasting peaceful future in the country; for this reason, WWP endorsed United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325) on women, peace, and security that was unanimously approved in 2000, recognizing the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls. It, therefore, calls for adopting a gender perspective to consider the unique needs of women and girls during conflict, repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction. Therefore, “WWP long ago adapted this call and acts relentlessly for equal inclusion of Israeli women in politics, in parliament, in security-related decisions and in peace negotiations” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023i](#)).

From 2014 onwards, the movement has organized hundreds of business meetings and discussion groups; hundreds of film screenings on the successes of the Liberian women’s struggle for peace; inter-religious events during major holidays, exhibitions, round tables, meetings, and conferences at universities; and sessions with the government and *Knesset*

representatives to urge political decisions in favor of conflict resolution. So, let us go over the highlights of their activity.

3. Significant Moments of the WWP Activity

In 2015, one year after the “Protective Edge” operation, they set up a tent outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s residence. For 50 days, hundreds of women fasted, and thousands came to show their support. During these first activities, many women and a fair number of men decided to join this movement. In 2016, 30,000 women and men, Israelis and Palestinians residing in Israel, both Jews and Arabs, organized a “March of Hope” when they marched for two weeks from the north to Jerusalem. Simultaneously, there were solidarity events all over the world. After that, there was a two-month demonstration in front of the *Knesset*, the Israeli Parliament, demanding a political agreement ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)); and to encourage greater mobilization, they organized a transport network from the country’s major cities and towns.

The year 2017 saw a series of significant activities, including establishing a “Women’s Election Committee for Peace and Security” at the *Knesset* and organizing an Easter peace train that brought 1,000 women to Beit Shean in the north of the country. Meanwhile, in May of the same year—on Trump’s visit to Israel—a human live sign was created with the following words: “Ready for Peace”. However, the event that resonated across the country was “Journey to Peace” in autumn: a two-week trip, from the four corners of the country, with tens of thousands of participants. All groups met at the “Hagar and Sarah Peace Village” built in the flat area near the Dead Sea. In Biblical tradition, Hagar represents the mother of the Arab people, and Sarah is the mother of the Jewish people. It is, therefore, significant that Hagar is mentioned before Sarah. There were discussion groups, exhibitions, and musical events, but, above all, there was an appeal to the rulers to start negotiations for a political agreement. The march ended in Jerusalem in the presence of Adina Bat Shalom, an influential cultural operator and activist for women’s rights, daughter of the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013), a spiritual leader of the Shas religious party. Meetings and study groups took place in a newly built large *Sukkat Shalom* (a hut/tent of peace). Again, about 30,000 women took part in the march ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)). Marches of this type have become a recurring event in the following years, gaining interest and debate even outside the State of Israel. Anna Segre, in the online Italian Jewish magazine *Moked*, comments on this march ([Segre 2017a](#)):

It seems significant that the movement involves women with different political opinions, observant and non-observant, overcoming at least in part the traditional difficulty of Israeli pacifist movements in finding consensus outside the secular, Ashkenazi, and left-wing world. Of course, even WWP is still a minority group (after all, was not the same true for Zionism in the beginnings?). Nonetheless, this unusual transversality leads us to hope that the voice of women can contribute to making a difference.¹

Anna Segre, again, on an event in Turin to make this movement known in Italy, stated the following ([Segre 2017b](#)):

The movement’s strength lies in its being transversal, not caged in traditional alignments and schemes, not easily labelled. It is a fascinating challenge for Israeli society, in which—as said before—the different components have few opportunities to meet and get to know each other. It is possibly an even more difficult challenge for us Italian Jews (but I do not think it would be better elsewhere), who love labels and highly divided events, despite our small numbers. Will we be able to embrace the challenge of approaching a cross-sectional movement or will we end up caging it in our labels?²

In just four years of activity, the WWP movement has raised an interesting debate in Israel and among the Diaspora Jewish communities, who are beginning to realize both the uniqueness of this women-led movement that manages to involve different realities

of the country. It is indeed a new mode of operation that can become a positive challenge for minority Jewish communities in the diaspora, such as, for example, the Italian Jewish communities.

In January 2018, the women of WWP obtained the right to set up a lobby group at the *Knesset*, which allows them to be heard every Monday by a commission of parliamentarians regarding peace solutions. Among their proposals is an analysis of the economic link between Israelis and Palestinians—both residents of Israel and the Palestinian territories—and the identification of projects that can improve life for both peoples. The movement believes that the security problem is linked not only to terrorism but also to an “unbalanced” economy ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023h](#)). In November of the same year, the first “International Peace Congress” was organized, with speakers coming from all over the world ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)). Again, the international press was not indifferent ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)).

Between 2018 and 2019, WWP established excursions with mixed groups of Israeli and Palestinian women for a more in-depth mutual understanding. This initiative implied overcoming various organizational problems, such as the request for permits for those residing in non-Israeli territories; however, the tenacity of these women also managed to overcome the complex bureaucratic problems associated with issuing permits. After picking up the Palestinian women at the checkpoints, they all spent the day together, getting to know each other’s stories and traditions. Such activities are defined by movement as “The Journey to Hope” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)), that is, towards a future in which what was experienced on this occasion could represent normality.

WWP’s work continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting online meetings to deepen mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. Of great importance in 2020 was a meeting between Liora Hadar, a Jewish woman from Alei Zahav in Samaria, and Ghadir Hani, an Arab woman from Akko, who talked about what they could share in that moment of health emergency without forgetting their different perspectives on life and their expectations. In the report of the meeting that appears on the WWP website, mutual impressions are reported: Ghadir stated, “I learned from Liora that there isn’t only one truth”, and Liora stated, “Ghadir taught me to look at a complex situation through the eyes of another person” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)). Other peace movements are also insisting on the complexity of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the need to look at the situation from the “other side”. However, these women manage to make their work much more visible. For a few years now, in addition to their website, they have also been using other social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The narrative particularity of this movement also using by social was the subject of a case study analyzed by Clara Knäpper Bohman, in which it is emphasized that it was the “female” narrative that contributed significantly to the rapid expansion of the movement ([Knäpper Bohman 2019](#)).

In 2021, the various activities and the presence at the *Knesset* continued unabated. On 25 March 2022, the collaboration between the *Women Wage Peace* and the *Women of the Sun*, a movement of Palestinian women, was made official ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023f, 2023g](#)): the agreement is of particular importance, as it allows the WWP movement to go beyond Israeli borders. During the ceremony near the Dead Sea, the partnership was celebrated by officially stating the following ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)):

We, women and mothers from both sides, who experience the pain of war on a daily basis, have decided to say ENOUGH and to do everything possible to end the conflict and to influence the leaders of both sides to resume negotiations.

Come and take part in this historic event; let us create a new reality!

This event had a great echo in both the Israeli and Arab press. *The Jerusalem Post* headlined, “Israeli, Palestinian women call to revive peace talks”; *Arab News* headlined, “Israeli and Palestinian mothers gather for peace by Dead Sea”; and many other newspapers in different countries have given space to important news ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023m](#)).

We cannot fail to mention the “The Journey to Peace” (September 2022), whose motto—both in Hebrew and Arabic—was as follows: “Enough! Enough war; enough violence, enough suffering, enough fatalities. The time has come to sit down and talk” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)), and the December 2022 demonstration in front of the *Knesset* at the inauguration of the new Israeli government. The WWP activists have been joined by different movements, LGBTQ+ groups, and the part of the population asking for a more democratic dialogue and inclusive management of the country for all the different affiliations. The slogan to urge the government was as follows: “You have no right to sentence us to unending wars” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023l](#)). The media gave prominence to the event, as well: *The Jerusalem Post* headlined, “Hundreds block Tel Aviv highway in protest against new government”; *Haaretz* headlined, “‘Iran Is Already Here’: Thousands Protest New Israeli Government Outside Knesset”; and *The New York Times* also headlined, “Protester Rally Against New Israeli Government” ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023m](#)). In all articles, the participation of activists belonging to different groups and representing different orientations of thought was emphasized. As can be seen, the activities of the WWP movement progressively include different affiliations and are also opening up to gender confrontation.

4. An Increasingly Significant Presence on the Territory with International Echoes

In just eight years of activity, not only has the WWP movement become numerically significant, but it has had an unprecedented impact on the territory and a meaningful international echo. In a short time, it has raised awareness throughout the country through massive female action, progressively involving women of different origins and faiths, different social backgrounds, Israelis and Palestinians, men, and recently also the LGBTQ+ community ([Asal et al. 2013](#); [Loewenthal and Miaari 2020](#)). It is no small feat! With patience and tenacity, the activists have managed, above all, to establish a dialogue with the members of the *Knesset*, proving that massive popular action can succeed in questioning the government of a nation.

This dialogue has yet to produce significant changes regarding the peace process in the Middle East, but we know how long and complex political processes are. What these women have pursued and partly achieved is nonetheless socially and politically significant. They are calling for a greater female contribution to the country’s leadership, which can advance, at a political level, what they have already begun to achieve among themselves. WWP is gaining more and more international acclaim, as shown in the Media section of their official website ([Women Wage Peace \(WWP\) 2023m](#)). The same applies to the discussions initiated by WWP women with the Diaspora Jewish communities that promote meetings about their activities, as described by the articles written by Anna Segre ([Segre 2017a, 2017b](#)) and published by *Moked*, the Portal of Italian Jewry, which contains more than 50 websites.

There are other realities that promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue in Israel. In the village *Neve Shalom-Wahat as-Salam*, founded in 1972, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim families live together. The village was recently renamed, prefixing the Arabic name as a sign of renewed Israeli acceptance. The peace education school in the village is very active and open to the entire area ([What al-Salam/Neve Shalom 2023](#)). The activities of the *Peres Peace House*, located in Jaffa, are also significant ([Peres Peace House 2023](#)), as are those of many other pacifist movements operating in the area ([Helman 2022](#)). The uniqueness of the WWP lies in the fact that it is a project of women who are committed to sociopolitical change by becoming protagonists in the management of the country and the conflict that has been tearing it apart for too long. Not all of them are experts in sociology and geopolitics. Most are women in a variety of professions and occupations. All, however, are convinced of the importance of women’s contribution to running the country at all levels. They pursue this perspective by starting with a renewal of day-to-day relations, without neglecting the importance of action that can influence government decisions ([Daniele 2014](#); [Federici and Angelo 2020](#); [Knäpper Bohman 2019](#); [Nahla 2011](#); [Sharoni 1995](#)).

5. Final Remarks

Women in the WWP movement have already done and achieved much. They have succeeded in building consensus among different social, cultural and religious affiliations to support dialogue and peace. They are open to partnerships with men, but their goal is female leadership in running the country. This aspect differentiates their movement from all other peace organizations that have long been active in the area: they are not satisfied with obtaining the reopening of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations but want to actively participate in the running of the country by bringing their women's point of view. Their goal is to trigger a radical shift in perspective, also from the point of view of greater social inclusion at all levels, including openness to new gender thinking. They have already succeeded in part: through their tenacity, they have forced *Knesset* members to consider their proposals and listen to their demands. They have also succeeded in giving great visibility to their movement by raising awareness among many people, who regularly participate in their initiatives and peace marches. They could also become partners in a Palestinian women's movement for peace, organizing activities despite the difficulties of police checkpoints between the Israeli and Palestinian territories. All of this, slowly but surely, is helping to change the mindset of the country, giving a voice to many minorities who are not always sufficiently heard. Thus, it can be said that the WWP movement is contributing to making the country increasingly democratic from a predominantly female perspective, making a significant contribution that could improve both the country's politics and economy: overcoming political tensions cannot be separated from overcoming economic disparities.

The movement's activity is above all that of raising awareness in the search for peace, which is fundamentally implemented in two directions: the demonstration that it is possible to act together, as they themselves are doing despite belonging to different religions and cultures, and the continuous confrontation with representatives of the Israeli parliament to urge the search for a political solution to the conflict. Perhaps, the most interesting aspect is precisely this search for peace solutions through confrontation: rather than the attempt to propose—or impose—a solution, there is a desire to try to seek it together. That is why the movement carries out its activities by dialoguing, confronting, and soliciting political attention to the social problems created by the conflict. What is special is that, in each case, the choices that are to lead to peace will have to be managed by female leadership. This perspective emerges strongly from all their projects: renewal and peace can be promoted by women and their participation in the running of the country, a feminine vision that promotes life and not death, as does every mother who cares for her family and children.

In the coming years, we will see the developments of what they have already begun to accomplish. These women, in short, have forced their country and foreign communities to listen to their voices and demands, which affect not only their lives but also the broader community and social well-being.

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Notes

- ¹ Italian text of the speech delivered by Anna Segre: “Mi pare significativo che il movimento coinvolga donne con diverse opinioni politiche, osservanti e non osservanti, superando almeno in parte la tradizionale difficoltà dei movimenti pacifisti israeliani a trovare consensi fuori dal mondo laico, ashkenazita e di sinistra. Certo, anche WWP per ora è un gruppo minoritario (del resto non lo era anche il sionismo degli inizi?), ma questa trasversalità insolita induce comunque a sperare che la voce delle donne possa contribuire in qualche misura a fare la differenza.”

- ² Italian text of the speech delivered by Anna Segre: “La forza del movimento sta appunto nel suo essere trasversale, non ingabbiato negli schieramenti e negli schemi tradizionali, non facilmente etichettabile. Una sfida affascinante per la società israeliana, in cui—come stato messo in evidenza in più interventi—le diverse componenti hanno scarse occasioni di incontro e conoscenza reciproca. Una sfida forse ancora più difficile per noi ebrei italiani (ma non credo che altrove sia meglio) che, pur dovendo convivere con i nostri piccoli numeri, amiamo crogiolarci nelle etichette e negli eventi a partecipazione parcellizzata. Saremo capaci di accogliere la sfida di avvicinarci trasversalmente a un movimento trasversale o finiremo per ingabbiarlo nelle nostre etichette?”

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