

## **'Just a Housewife': *The Feminine Mystique*, Women Strike for Peace and Domestic Identity in 1960s America**

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*Some criticism of Women Strike for Peace suggests that their maternal identification and pride in projecting the image of 'housewife and mother' solidified the Feminine Mystique. This article argues that members of Women Strike for Peace adopted this image as a tactic in order to advance their campaign for peace. In recognising the political awareness of members, an assessment of the group's successes as perceived by former activists demonstrates the benefits that the image of domesticity brought to Women Strike for Peace. Additionally, recollections suggest that success has been understood through a framework recognising the sought-after goals of feminist community organisation. While the group had a contentious relationship with feminism, members have since attempted to redress the narrative surrounding their feminist stance. Former activists have attempted simultaneously to take pride in their identity as housewives while claiming to have heralded women's liberation through their actions.*

**Keywords:** Betty Friedan, Amy Swerdlow, Women Strike for Peace, Feminism, Maternal, Peace

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan wrote that the identification of women as housewives and mothers had been used as a repressive tool to confine women to a stunted, domestic role in American society. Published in 1963, Friedan's work offered assertions concerning the housewife label, seeing systemic attempts by American media, culture and society to constrain the sphere of women's influence to the home. This, in turn, inhibited the ability of women to achieve real fulfilment in their lives, causing a 'problem that has no name' to blight the consciousness of the American middle class. Although her relationship with women's liberation became contentious, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* continues to be heralded as the spark of 1960s feminism. Friedan directly criticised the activities of the anti-nuclear activist group 'Women Strike for Peace' (known variously as W.S.P., 'Women for Peace' or 'Women Strike'), writing that:

Women must make their contribution not as 'housewives' but as citizens. It is, perhaps, a step in the right direction when a woman protests nuclear testing under the banner of 'Women Strike for Peace.' But why does the professional illustrator who heads the peace movement say she is 'just a housewife,' and her followers insist that once the testing stops, they will stay happily at home with their children?<sup>1</sup>

Friedan believed that the identity advanced by Women Strike for Peace detracted from the purpose of their activism. In campaigning as 'mothers, first and foremost' and emphasising their domestic femininity, W.S.P. members (WSPers) did a disservice to American women. The impression given by

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 307.

her critique is that by falling back on the traditional gender stereotype of domestic servitude, members refused to display their own political sensibilities, relying instead on a justification for peace activism that depended only on the emotive appeal allowed to mothers. Daniel Horowitz has persuasively raised the irony of this standpoint, arguing that Friedan's own exaggeration of her identity as a housewife undermined her criticism of Women Strike for Peace. In downplaying her previous political activism, Horowitz contends that Friedan herself appropriated an image of domesticity in order to give credence to the arguments in *The Feminine Mystique* and demonstrate that she herself was bursting out of a socially prescribed role.<sup>2</sup> It added legitimacy to her work. The work of Horowitz perhaps best counters Friedan's initial distaste for W.S.P. Yet she later furthered her rebuke of the core ideology at the heart of traditional women's peace protest, stating that she did not 'believe the fact that milk once flowed in [her] breast is the reason' she was against war.<sup>3</sup> To summarise Friedan's views, Women Strike for Peace actually solidified the feminine mystique through their activism, cementing the socially accepted view that women should be seen primarily as housewives. Emphasis of femininity over gender neutral citizenship set back the drive for women's equality by tying pacifism to traditional gender norms.

Friedan's analysis does offer some nuanced points with regards to the formation of Women Strike for Peace. Dagmar Wilson, the somewhat reluctant head of the group, was a successful children's illustrator. Friedan evidently felt that this background of professional work had offered Wilson a position within mainstream American society that surpassed her identity as a housewife. Wilson should not have referred to herself in such terms. Likewise, members of Women Strike for Peace had explicitly stated that once they had achieved their aim of ceasing nuclear weapons testing they would happily return to their 'pots-and-pans and PTAs and all the duties and pleasures that we have since neglected'.<sup>4</sup> Friedan's criticisms offer a useful entry point to discussing the broader relationship between feminism and Women Strike for Peace. As the Women's Liberation Movement emerged towards the end of the 1960s, it raised questions over W.S.P.'s dependence on rhetoric and images flush with allusions to women's domestic status. The case could certainly be made that W.S.P.'s rhetoric supported the tenets of the feminine mystique.

Friedan overlooked the extent to which W.S.P. utilised this image as an effective tactic in order to boost their legitimacy within a political climate that rebuffed any dissent as unwelcome radicalism. Rather than offering a timid acceptance of a socially prescribed role, Women Strike for Peace appropriated the image of staid domesticity to exploit a 'particular historical construction of women as mothers' in order to advance their campaign and achieve their goals.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Friedan underestimated the extent to which campaigning on a forum that embraced the image of housewife and mother allowed W.S.P. to empower otherwise politically alienated women to act. It created a close-knit community of likeminded individuals unafraid to offer their views and an environment within which political activism was within reach. What becomes intriguing from a study of Women

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias eds., *Women, Militarism and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 3.

Strike for Peace is the way in which the group's intersections with feminism are depicted in the recollections of former activists. The maintenance of domestic identity is something that bears analysis due to its implications for feminist understandings of the group. To suggest that the feminine image appropriated by W.S.P. worked in opposition to Friedan's vision for female empowerment simplifies the complex relationship between W.S.P. and feminism. In order to assess this relationship, an analysis of Women Strike for Peace should consider the success felt by W.S.P. members, their empowerment, the lives they subsequently experienced and the pride taken in domestic identity by former activists.

Women Strike for Peace was formed in the fall of 1961 with the intention of staging a one-off demonstration in support of a nuclear test ban treaty. Wilson – a self-described 'housewife and mother' from Georgetown in Washington, D.C. – had become disaffected by the inaction of contemporary peace groups. She called together local friends and associates to gather support for an all-women's activity towards peace.<sup>6</sup> Condemning both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. for creating nuclear fallout-related health risks, W.S.P. emphasised maternal identity and rhetoric in order to justify the group's pacifist activism. Appealing to better judgement and 'common sense' within government circles, Women Strike for Peace mobilised an estimated 50,000 women in sixty-one communities across the U.S. to demonstrate simultaneously in their localities on 1 November 1961.<sup>7</sup> This initial action became emblematic of W.S.P.'s approach which co-ordinated local activism to create national visibility. Following the success of the first demonstration, Women Strike for Peace continued to act for peace and became a visible presence in the American peace movement throughout the 1960s and beyond. The appeal to maternal values, whilst refreshing to the public, was certainly not a new development. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) had linked femininity to peace issues since World War One, whilst the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) adopted similar tropes in their anti-nuclear advertising campaigns towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> However, the creativity manifested by its campaigns often set W.S.P. apart from its contemporaries. The visibility and publicity achieved by their tactics differentiate Women Strike for Peace from similar groups.

For W.S.P. members, domesticity centred on motherhood and the providing of a stable 'family life'.<sup>9</sup> Motherhood, in turn, could be defined with concern for the community, something evident in protest designed to save all the world's children. Anti-draft campaigns employed the slogan 'Not Our Sons, Not Your Sons, Not Their Sons' in an attempt to show solidarity with mothers around the world and highlight the goal of protecting all children, not just those of WSPers. That said, Women Strike for Peace drew from a relatively limited demographic. Membership largely consisted of affluent, white, middle-class American women. Many were college-educated and had been brought up in Jewish families. Scant time was given to discuss issues of race and class. Some women seemed perplexed that women of colour could not be persuaded to join the group. Many willing grassroots members found it difficult to involve themselves in campaigns that required a sizeable disposable

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<sup>6</sup> Dagmar Wilson, "Tainting the Antinuclear Movement: HUAC and the irrepressible Women Strike for Peace," in *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America*, eds. Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 284.

<sup>7</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 15, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Milton S. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy, 1957-1985* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 58.

income (particularly the many foreign trips W.S.P. embarked upon). The age of members varied widely – from teenagers to grandmothers – though Women Strike for Peace has been looked upon as the creative, younger foil to the WILPF.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan singled the group out for criticism due to the perceived buttressing of traditional gender stereotypes that W.S.P.'s protest brought. Certainly a contentious relationship emerged between Women Strike for Peace and second wave feminism.<sup>11</sup> Friedan's critique suggested that W.S.P. was not a positive force for feminism in the United States, largely due to the group's reliance on an essentialist position to justify members' pacifism. Indeed, one of the presumed failures of Women Strike for Peace was that they were unable to align themselves with women's liberationists as the movement sparked to life at the end of the 1960s. Many younger members of the Women's Liberation Movement became critical of the 'false consciousness' inherent in W.S.P. dissent, going so far as to suggest that 'the traditional women's peace movement condoned and even enforced the gender hierarchy in which men made war and women wept.'<sup>12</sup> In a marked reversal from the reasoning that motivated earlier women's peace protests, radical feminist elements attacked W.S.P.'s priorities, believing that women's liberation and equality should take priority over the cause of world peace. Members of W.S.P. believed the group's rhetoric to be 'feminine' more than 'feminist'. They first became aware of a feminist backlash from involvement in the Jeanette Rankin Brigade in January 1968. Younger, radical elements of the brigade made an artistic show out of 'burying traditional motherhood' and caused some W.S.P. members to reflect that they could no longer consider themselves radical.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, members of Women Strike for Peace based in North Shore, Illinois, later lamented that it was 'particularly painful' that the group could not capitalise on the heightened female consciousness created by the onset of women's liberation in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

Rhetoric from early protests displays a complex relationship between the goals of Women Strike for Peace and feminist agendas. Prominent women's peace scholar Harriet Hyman Alonso has argued that W.S.P.'s creative use of image presented a form of 'protest art', juxtaposing women's socially assigned role as nurturers and caregivers with their inability to become involved in foreign policy discourse.<sup>15</sup> However, while acknowledging the maternalism imbued in their protest, Women Strike for Peace overtly stressed that they were not feminists and did not seek any gendered revolution within American society. While railing against the prevailing 'male logic' that had established nuclear brinkmanship, Women Strike for Peace members assured their audience that 'we are not striking against our husbands. It is my guess that we will make the soup that they will ladle out to the children on Wednesday'.<sup>16</sup> Historian Andrea Estepa, in an analysis of radicalism within Women Strike for Peace, notes that the critique of a male military establishment was only 'implied' and never

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<sup>10</sup> Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Woman's Issue: A history of the U.S. movement for world peace and women's rights* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 211.

<sup>11</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 1 – "National Consultative Committee Minutes and Memos – Aug 1970-1973."

<sup>15</sup> Alonso, *Peace as a Woman's Issue*, 225.

<sup>16</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 22.

explicitly advanced as a plank within their campaigns.<sup>17</sup> W.S.P. members did not originally wish to be seen as advancing a feminist agenda. These problematic tropes of W.S.P. protest add weight to Friedan's critique.

The extent to which W.S.P. members continued to identify as housewives and mothers after their involvement in peace activism is particularly interesting. Much pride emerged from WSPers when identifying as housewives, and some activists took steps to indicate that they were 'political novices' embarking on a first foray into political organising. Wilson stated that she had 'never been in any way politically active' prior to W.S.P.'s birth.<sup>18</sup> The memoir of Philadelphia leader Ethel Taylor provides a somewhat contradictory account of her life as an activist, suggesting that the earlier activities of WSPers had been 'limited to the PTA and the school library association'.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note, though, that many 'key women' had been politically engaged before 1961. In this way Friedan's assessment is correct in stating that Women Strike members were not 'just housewives'.

Many W.S.P. members had acted on their political concerns and developed community organising experience during the 1950s. Wilson's parents had personal involvement in the campaign for women's suffrage and had instilled political awareness in their children. Wilson herself was heavily involved in SANE prior to W.S.P. Her husband's work as cultural attaché to the British Embassy brought the Wilson family into foreign policy circles.<sup>20</sup> Taylor had formed the local chapter of SANE, served on SANE's national board and had worked within the WILPF. Taylor had also demonstrated a keen political awareness during the 1950s, maintaining extensive correspondence with various U.S. Senators and Representatives on a multitude of foreign policy issues.<sup>21</sup> Ruth Gage-Colby co-ordinated international initiatives for W.S.P. in New York from experience developed as a member of the U.N. press corps. She had already engaged in peace activism prior to her involvement with Women Strike for Peace, to the extent that newly emerging peace organisations such as Milwaukee Citizens for Peace and Disarmament considered her 'an influential figure within the American peace movement among women'.<sup>22</sup> Mary Clarke, a dominant figure in the Los Angeles chapter of Women Strike for Peace, had ties to the Communist Party in the U.S., as had Lyla Hoffman, herself a known former Communist. Bella Abzug was a resilient civil rights lawyer who felt compelled to tackle issues of social justice. Shirley Lens organised in Chicago for myriad progressive concerns alongside her husband, Sidney. Elise Boulding had worked as a social scientist.<sup>23</sup> Many more WSPers brought the experience

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Estepa, "Taking the White Gloves Off: Women Strike for Peace and the Transformation of Women's Activist Identities in the United States, 1961-1980" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2012), 233.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, "Tainting the Antinuclear Movement," 284.

<sup>19</sup> Ethel Taylor, *We Made a Difference: My Personal Journey with Women Strike for Peace* (Philadelphia: Camino Books, 1998), xi.

<sup>20</sup> Dagmar Wilson in *Peacework: Oral Histories of Women Peace Activists*, ed. Judith Porter Adams (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 193-199; Dagmar Wilson interviewed by Joan Drake, 15 April 1989, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection ARS.0056, Stanford University Archive of Recorded Sound.

<sup>21</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Papers, A3, Box 1 – "Ethel Taylor Files – Congressional Correspondence (1951-1974)"; Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 41; Taylor, *We Made a Difference*.

<sup>22</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 188-193; University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee Archives, Citizens for Peace and Disarmament, 1963 Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen L. Endres, "L.A. Wisp," in *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues*, eds. Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 149-156; American University, Washington, D.C., Archives and Special Collections; W.S.P. Papers, Box 19 – "FOIA FBI Files – 100-39566 Vol.4 (1)"; Alan H. Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1920-1976* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013); Amy C. Schneidhorst, *Building a Just and Secure World: Popular Front Women's Struggle for*

of involvement in peace groups such as SANE and WILPF to the newly formed Women Strike for Peace. It becomes clear from assessing the biographies of W.S.P. members that their political backgrounds have since been masked by the focus on their appeal to housewives and mothers.<sup>24</sup>

Along with the politicised background of key members, tactical decisions with regards the group's campaigns further demonstrate the political nous of Women Strike for Peace. While activists often depicted Women Strike for Peace a loosely connected 'non-organisation', a national group structure did exist that included defined, titled roles for some members, well organised national and regional conferences, steering committees, clearing houses and the publication of a national newsletter, *Memo*.<sup>25</sup> At all levels of organising, there was a keen astuteness to the politics of peace activism and community organisation that suggests that the image of 'housewife and mother' was an appropriation borne out of tactical considerations. On more than one occasion, members were encouraged to send telegrams to public officials individually, rather than under the auspices of Women Strike for Peace. The intention was to suggest that the group had massive grassroots support for its campaign, demonstrating a prudent approach to political activism.<sup>26</sup> Certainly a number of desired benefits were sought from the adoption of maternal imagery. Taylor unashamedly admitted that W.S.P. engaged in ongoing attempts to gain support from middle-class housewives across the United States. Recalling her experience in the Assembly of Unrepresented People in August 1965, Taylor explains that W.S.P. had 'hoped that our conventional attire would allow women, seeing us on television or reading about us in the news, to identify with us, despite the fact that we were engaged in actions that might seem a tad unorthodox'.<sup>27</sup>

The group was deeply concerned with the health effects of nuclear testing on their children and wanted to raise 'a hue and a cry' against it, not only by attracting women who had an awareness of the existing peace movement, but also by attracting women who had not yet felt compelled to act. Seen in this light, the activities of Women Strike appear very shrewd. Within a few months of forming, Women Strike for Peace was involved in the collection of children's milk teeth to be tested for traces of Strontium-90 and Iodine-131, the presence of which would demonstrate the hazards of nuclear fallout from weapons testing. While on the surface appearing a creative and emotive display, this method of protest becomes all the more intuitive when understood that members were simultaneously appealing to the U.S. Government and to mothers. While calling for the government to ban nuclear tests, WSPers made sure to appear as though campaigning on behalf of children all over the world. The group 'tried to attract the American housewife who had not previously attended a peace action' and the best way to do this was to explicitly show that W.S.P. represented their

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*Peace and Justice in Chicago During the 1960s* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Amy Swerdlow, "'Not My Son, Not Your Son, Not Their Sons: Mothers Against the Vietnam Draft,'" in *Give Peace a Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, eds. Melvin Small and William D. Hoover (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 162.

<sup>24</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 49; Alonso, *Peace as a Woman's Issue*, 202; Ethel Barol Taylor interviewed by Judith Porter Adams, 5 October 1987 - Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection ARS.0056, Stanford University Archive of Recorded Sound; Wilson in *Peacework*, 195.

<sup>26</sup> American University, Washington, D.C., Archives and Special Collections; W.S.P. Papers, Box 20 - "FOIA FBI Files - 100-39566 Vol.23 (1)."

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *We Made a Difference*, 34-35.

demographic and were campaigning on their behalf. Abzug argued that this was the case, stressing her belief that members of the group often pretended 'to know less than they actually did' in order to broaden their appeal to the average American mother.<sup>28</sup>

There was a certain awareness in W.S.P. that by adopting a moderate image they could couch their dissent in terms that would be accepted by the American public. Dismayed at the red-baiting and purge of communist members in SANE in the late 1950s, the group recognised the dangers associated with anti-nuclear protest. While Eugene Rossi noted the changeable nature of public opinion, Women Strike exercised the 'moral authority' of motherhood in order to appeal more acceptable to the middle-ground, and avoid antagonising opposition to their stand.<sup>29</sup> They criticised both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. for the nuclear arms race and tit-for-tat testing schedules, intending to occupy an apolitical, 'third camp' stance towards international relations. Members stressed that as housewives and mothers, they were only concerned with the health of their children. While Friedan argued against projecting this image on the grounds of gender equality, Women Strike for Peace members shielded themselves from some political opposition through protest devoid of political cliché. Amy Schneidhorst, writing about mature women's protest in Chicago, notes that the essentialist nature of W.S.P.'s rhetoric masked what could have been argued was a Marxist critique of American politics.<sup>30</sup> Amy Swerdlow, a former member and author of the only historical work dedicated to Women Strike for Peace, claimed that W.S.P.'s radical critique of militarism was only legitimised by the staid image of its members. Legitimacy was key for W.S.P. members.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge of what would be deemed acceptable to the general public is further evidenced in Jessica M. Frazier's analysis. Writing about later ventures to Vietnamese women's groups, Frazier notes that W.S.P. was aware of differing cultural constructions of motherhood in the U.S. and Vietnam. When reporting on their trip, W.S.P. fashioned the Vietnamese image of motherhood away from the military-active picture emerging from the Vietnam War to a more protective and nurturing figure that was more acceptable to American women.<sup>32</sup>

Dismay over the use of maternal femininity as an image can be assuaged when assessing the successes directly attributable to Women Strike's tactics. Ironically, given their fractious relationship to feminism, W.S.P.'s image of domestic motherhood produced benefits conducive to a feminist ideal of women's political organising. The empowerment and mobilization of otherwise politically alienated American women is a particularly remarkable feat. Women Strike for Peace began as a small meeting of Wilson's friends in September 1961. By November, thousands of women across the U.S. had organised their own local chapters, and, though relatively fragmented nationally, women came out from their homes and onto the streets in a simultaneous, co-ordinated political demonstration. Much of the credit for this mobilization is due to the emphasis on domestic identity. Women Strike for Peace provided an outlet for housewives to act on their concerns where previously no forum existed through which to speak out. Minutes from a steering committee meeting in

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<sup>28</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene J. Rossi, "Mass and Attentive Opinion on Nuclear Weapons Tests and Fallout, 1954-1963," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 29 (1965): 280-297.

<sup>30</sup> Schneidhorst, *Building a Just and Secure World*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica M. Frazier, "Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women's Union, and the Women's Union of Liberation, 1965-1968," *Peace and Change* 37 (2012): 339-365.

October 1961 expressed the 'general sentiment' of respondents to the initial call for action; 'Thank Heaven, at last there is something I can do'.<sup>33</sup> Wilson, showing the modesty that became a signature of her leadership, explained the founding of the group with the expression that it was an 'idea whose time had come'. Women were ready to become politically active within the anti-nuclear test ban debate but required a group that represented them well enough to become involved.<sup>34</sup> The women of W.S.P. had to play the role of housewives and mothers in order to achieve that support.

Members were able to show the general public that there was a group that represented housewives and allowed politically restrained women to become more involved in public political discourse. W.S.P.'s key women were aware of this role and acknowledged their impact on this isolated but potent demographic. Hoffman, speaking several years after the formation of the group, expressed a desire not to shy away from the domestic image that had served W.S.P. so well, believing that the group 'filled a void' within the peace movement and was able to secure the support of women who did not feel represented by other existing groups. Through their 'folksy' appeal to maternal values, Women Strike 'gave the impression that here were women really working for peace'.<sup>35</sup> While Friedan believed that appealing as 'just housewives' indicated that the group did not respect women's desire to become more active in public life, the appeal to housewives by Women Strike for Peace appeared to come *from* housewives. As such, W.S.P. provided a supportive forum for women to become involved in politics without feeling intimidated. The desire to persuade women of the 'seriousness of [their] purpose' is represented by the exhaustive attempts to secure a leading public figure to speak to Women Strike members prior to their first demonstration. A letter to Katherine Hepburn stated that W.S.P. needed 'an inspiring woman speaker to support and encourage other women'.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, motherhood was not a prerequisite for involvement with Women Strike for Peace. Some women without children began campaigning with the group due to an affinity for their style of protest. For many women who had children the urge to campaign arose from pacifist concerns that they had developed prior to becoming mothers. A 1962 sociological survey of members conducted by Elise Boulding found that having a child was actually one of the less significant motivations for becoming involved in peace protest, with only 5 percent of women citing it as a reason for their 'awakening'. The more common reasons included 'independent reading' or 'school/college experience'.<sup>37</sup> This survey provides further evidence to suggest that the identity of motherhood has been exaggerated as an underlying motive behind the protests of W.S.P. members.

Once cajoled into action, W.S.P. members could find themselves part of a close-knit community of likeminded women. The domestic identity of these women bound them closely together. For some, this was the first taste of community organising or political activism. Forming groups of previously alienated women around an easily identifiable image enabled W.S.P. to foster strong communal

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<sup>33</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 1 – "Minutes of Steering Committee – 1962-1964."

<sup>34</sup> American University, Washington, D.C., Archives and Special Collections; W.S.P. Papers, Box 2 – "Newsletters – Memo, 1963-1964, 1967, 1969-1970, 1976."

<sup>35</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, ACC90A-028, Box 1 – "Miscellaneous Correspondence."

<sup>36</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A3, Box 1 – "D. Wilson Files – Official Letters (1961)."

<sup>37</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 2 – "Documents Describing W.S.P. History."



bonds between members. In many instances, favourable reflections of their relationships with others imbue the narratives produced by former activists. Despite later strains in friendships and disputes over geographical bias, memories of W.S.P. activism focus on harmony. WSPers from Bergen County, New Jersey, noted that the true success of their experience was simply having discovered one another.<sup>38</sup> Taylor wrote very sentimentally that members remembered the anniversaries and birthdays of other women, making efforts to celebrate these occasions even in the midst of confusing and stressful demonstrations. For Taylor the true 'magic' of Women Strike for Peace came from the women she worked with.<sup>39</sup> The constant reference to W.S.P. being structured as a non-organisation implies unspoken unity between members. Recollections from former activists consistently discount the existence of a formal hierarchy or organisational arrangements within the group. Yet despite this, memories paint images of impeccably co-ordinated protests occurring spontaneously and simultaneously across the country in the absence of any specific organisation. In memory at least, former activists declare that WSPers had an instinctual relationship with each other by virtue of their united identification with maternalism and domesticity. This owes much to the strength of domestic identity.

Members of Women Strike for Peace felt comfortable with their image as housewives and mothers and at ease justifying their peace protest through emotive, maternal rhetoric. The image adopted offered a shield to reluctant women who were perhaps nervous about involving themselves in political activism. Boulding's 1962 survey claimed that the testimony of one woman spoke for the majority when she said that she felt 'like an idiot' when taking part in demonstrations.<sup>40</sup> There appeared to be a general reluctance to campaign in the public eye, particularly in the first few months of W.S.P.'s life. Most women preferred the work that involved letter writing, lobby-by-proxy and education drives, rather than the street protests which were far more visible.<sup>41</sup> And yet, by the time the anti-Vietnam War movement emerged, Women Strike for Peace had become one of the more visible presences in the U.S. peace movement, renowned for their creative street demonstrations and ability to craft media-friendly acts of protest.<sup>42</sup> The key women of Women Strike understood the necessity to attract the press in order to transmit their message, demonstrating the willingness to have attention thrust upon WSPers. Sit-ins occurred at congressional offices, sometimes resulting in arrests. Members willingly engaged in 'die-ins' in front of federal buildings. Some met with North Vietnamese women in direct violation of the U.S. government, with California W.S.P.er Clarke and New York W.S.P.er Lorraine Gordon being the first supporters of the American peace movement to travel to Hanoi. Ultimately, protest predicated on maternal impulse felt comfortable for members of Women Strike for Peace as it allowed them a safe and seemingly instinctual point to enter into complex political discourse.

Investment in the portrayal of stoic, staid motherhood sometimes limited Women Strike for Peace's range of protest activities. This makes radical acts conducted by WSPers notable. Alice Herz from Detroit Women for Peace became the first American to immolate herself in protest at the Vietnam War in 1965. Some members embarked on tax boycotts and other forms of subversion. A February 1967 protest outside the Pentagon resulted in women banging their shoes against the doors of the

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<sup>38</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *We Made a Difference*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 2 – "Documents Describing W.S.P. History."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Alonso, *Peace as a Woman's Issue*, 215.

building. A White House protest in September 1967 included clashes with police that resulted in unsavoury news reports. The activities conducted by more radical members evidently troubled the wider group. A number of WSPers felt uncomfortable being associated with radical actions. In many of these cases, splits emerged between W.S.P. activists who supported such activity and those who wished the organisation to maintain its distance from it.<sup>43</sup> Moderate action still appealed to most members and indeed was necessary in order to maintain an image of legitimacy and respectability. Radical protest was not compatible with the identity Women Strike projected. There were rolling debates throughout late 1968 and 1969 concerning the role of Women Strike for Peace, particularly with regards to the basic identity of the group. Most members worried that their identity and special place in the peace movement had been lost within anti-war coalitions and radical protest.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, owing to their role as mothers, some members felt reluctant to be away from their children for too long. Lillian Hayward and Cora Weiss, both highly influential in W.S.P. nationally, stressed their inability to become involved in protests that could result in arrest due to their childcare responsibilities.<sup>45</sup>

Though the image of domesticity restrained certain activities, W.S.P.'s references to motherhood as a justification for peace protest clearly enabled members to participate in activities that other women struggled to become involved in. W.S.P.'s work within the Draft Resistance Movement is emblematic of this. Much of what has been written concerning women and draft work focuses on the limitations placed on women's involvement in what was largely a male-dominated field of protest. Barrie Thorne, reflecting on her own experiences in her 1975 case study 'Women in the Draft Resistance Movement', called draft work 'in a sense, the point of ultimate indignity in the experience of New Left women'. Thorne wrote that the draft resisters marginalised the role of women in the movement as only men could experience the risks involved with resisting military service.<sup>46</sup> Sara Evans wrote her influential work, *Personal Politics*, around a similar theme. She believed that women's submissive status within protest movements spawned the frustrations that sparked the Women's Liberation Movement.<sup>47</sup>

The history of draft resistance does much to emphasise the machismo and male swagger surrounding the movement. For example historian Michael Foley discusses the role of women as 'Resister Sisters', working only in 'clearly defined support functions'.<sup>48</sup> However this view of women's roles contrasts markedly with the attitude Women Strike for Peace members have taken towards their experiences. They remember their involvement with the Draft Resistance Movement as a time of great success, dynamism and enthusiasm. Working predominantly as draft counsellors, Women Strike played a very useful part in the functions of the resistance movement, conducting educational drives and speaking

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<sup>43</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 2 – "Washington W.S.P. Retreat – October 5, 1968."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Schneidhorst, *Building a Just and Secure World*, 119.

<sup>46</sup> Barrie Thorne, "Women in the Draft Resistance Movement: A Case Study of Sex Roles and Social Movements," *Sex Roles* 1 (1975): 179-195.

<sup>47</sup> Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182-184.

in public schools to raise awareness of the Vietnam War. Swerdlow claimed that W.S.P.'s role in the resistance to the draft exemplified 'women's age-old ability to carve out political space and power for themselves in a man's world by acting in the service of others'.<sup>49</sup> In essence, WSPers accepted that their job was to provide 'support' for draft resisters. Members reconciled this view without feeling marginalised by framing the issue through a maternal lens and embraced something of a parental role for those resisters whose support networks had broken down. Estepa writes in depth about W.S.P.'s role as part of the draft resistance movement, arguing that W.S.P. could offer an alternative for women who wanted to work towards draft resistance without accepting a marginal role. She states that 'while many of their activities were "supportive" in nature, the women's peace groups were autonomous and set their own agenda'. Much of this owed to their identity as mothers.<sup>50</sup>

Adding a generational connotation to W.S.P.'s identity alongside their role as women, it is perhaps unsurprising to see that the anti-war movement warmly received members of Women Strike and found their work rewarding. In addition to providing vital support networks for draft resisters, Women Strike often contributed food and blankets to protesters embarking on long, arduous demonstrations.<sup>51</sup> Their identity as mothers allowed members to build trusting relationships with senior police figures, in some cases allowing WSPers to moderate the police response to radical demonstrations.<sup>52</sup> These instances show some of the many benefits brought by an unthreatening identity based on domesticity and motherhood. Schneidhorst, writing about perceived generational gaps between protesters in the 1960s, argues that Women Strike's close relationship with younger activists provided the emotional support necessary for activists to embark on more 'risky' and 'confrontational' campaigns than would otherwise have been feasible.<sup>53</sup> The argument here is that due to the non-confrontational nature of W.S.P.'s feminine identity the group had more of an impact on the wider peace movement than is often credited.

Reception to Women Strike for Peace was overwhelmingly positive. The assertion that the group was 'an idea whose time had come' holds weight given the response to the initial march. Wilson noted the 'hundreds of letters' of support received by W.S.P. members, exclaiming that more were 'coming every day'.<sup>54</sup> The 50,000 that marched across the country was positive enough, but the support forthcoming from women following the demonstration encouraged Women Strike to continue their activism. Even authority figures welcomed the substance of W.S.P. rhetoric. A New York Police Officer tasked with controlling the first event told one protester that 'we certainly sympathize with you ma'am'.<sup>55</sup> Many sections of the press were equally positive about W.S.P.'s campaign. *The Washington Post* praised the group's 'even-handed common sense'. In an ironic twist on Friedan's suggestion that W.S.P. campaigned as citizens, the *San Francisco Chronicle* did away with conceptions

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<sup>49</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 186.

<sup>50</sup> Estepa, "Taking the White Gloves Off," 256.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963-1975* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), 139.

<sup>52</sup> Estepa, "Taking the White Gloves Off," 263.

<sup>53</sup> Schneidhorst, *Building a Just and Secure World*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Marjorie Hunter, "Arms Race Opposed – Response Cheers Head of 'Strike'," *New York Times*, 22 November 1961.

<sup>55</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 16.

of gender, writing respectfully that the Mayor had received a petition from a 'group of *citizens* on a matter of extreme gravity' [emphasis added].<sup>56</sup> Rather than merely receiving good coverage though, members of Women Strike for Peace cultivated amiable relationships with individual journalists. Whilst conducting an interview with Wilson prior to the 1 November 1961 march, news reporter Roger Mudd asked what the content of Wilson's speech would be. Upon hearing the matter of her argument, Mudd remarked 'well, you couldn't want better than that, could you?'<sup>57</sup> This exchange is symptomatic of the positive relationship with the press present throughout W.S.P.'s activism. Recounting an incident that could have seen W.S.P. attacked by the press during the Vietnam War, Taylor claims that assembled journalists declared 'we would never do that to you'.<sup>58</sup> This anecdotal evidence suggests that journalists themselves had a personal affection for Women Strike for Peace, and many wrote favourable pieces in support of the group's activities.<sup>59</sup> This positive reception owes much to the moderate, respectable image adopted by the group.

This is not to suggest that Women Strike for Peace had immunity from criticism. Using motherhood to justify dissent incurred disdain from members of the public holding different attitudes towards motherhood. Some letters to the group suggested that if WSPers did want to come across as 'good mothers', they should return to their homes and devote their time to looking after their own children.<sup>60</sup> Much of this criticism originated from other women. However, when criticism emerged from authority figures it was often restrained and couched in terms that made clear to people that the women themselves were not the target of criticism. An article in the *San Francisco Examiner* dated 21 May 1962 perceived undertones of communism within W.S.P.'s dissent, but strained to declare the belief that the women were 'well-intentioned and dedicated' nonetheless. Sinister communist elements had 'duped' Women Strike for Peace, whose members were 'sincere in their contributions of time and money for what they have construed as a worthy cause...totally unaware of the influence wielded by the Commies and their cohorts'.<sup>61</sup> This attitude towards W.S.P. came also from both police officers dealing directly with the group and from some sections of the F.B.I. who had been charged with linking members to communist figures.<sup>62</sup> Whilst this could be looked upon as a patronising attitude – making out that women were not able to come to their political outlooks independently of more knowledgeable directors – it also points out that W.S.P. were exempt from the kinds of aggressive, personal criticism being levelled at other contemporary groups. Advancing an image portraying W.S.P. members as apolitical mothers provided a shield to members from potential detractors.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, "Tainting the Antinuclear Movement," 285.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *We Made a Difference*, 71.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Sophia Wyatt, "One Day Strike for Peace," *Manchester Guardian*, 12 April 1962, 2; Russell Baker, "Observer," *New York Times*, 15 December 1962, 6; Mary McGrory, "Women Invade Congress," *Boston Globe*, 12 May 1963, A3; Mary McGrory, "Protests Go Matronly: Grammas In, Beats Out," *Boston Globe*, 29 November 1965, 9; Nadine Brozan, "Women's Group Began as One Day Protest 4,215 Days Ago," *New York Times*, 16 May 1973, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Letters in *New York Times*, 20 May 1962; Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A3, Box 5 – "Crackpot Letters and Other Points of View (1963, 1970)."

<sup>61</sup> American University, Washington, D.C., Archives and Special Collections; W.S.P. Papers, Box 19 – "FOIA FBI Files – 100-19566 Vol.12 (1)."

<sup>62</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 24.

Domestic responsibilities had an impact on some Women Strike members' involvement. Whilst embarking on tireless and vigorous campaigns, WSPers attempted to maintain their roles as the housewife and mother in their families. Many activists were reluctant to abandon their domestic responsibilities or their peace activism, so these two demanding roles often conflicted. A number of members spoke about the unconditional support received from family members, but others acknowledged that their families suffered as a result of their peace work. Wilson remembered the concerns she had for her family, recognising that her appearance in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee could have cost her husband his job at the British Embassy.<sup>63</sup> Homes often suffered upheaval. Running a national peace network out of family homes resulted in living rooms becoming headquarters; dens acted as clearing houses for an influx of literature from around the world; kitchens became roundtables for discussion on possible campaign strategies.

Some women were charged with neglecting their families. Christopher Wilson himself admitted trying to 'sabotage' his wife's work.<sup>64</sup> Correspondence suggests that husbands were often unhappy at having to take over child-caring responsibilities, ordering their wives to return to their domestic roles after trips away.<sup>65</sup> Much to the chagrin of some women's liberationists, the toll of family responsibility often led to Women Strike for Peace members withdrawing from the group in order to cope with their domestic responsibilities. A note from W.S.P. member Olga Penn to the National Coordinating Committee in 1968 depicts her group 'falling apart...Naomi is in a hospital with an angina, and I am rather shackled to a guy who has had three coronaries and has to be driven to and fro'.<sup>66</sup> Several National Office Secretaries resigned from their positions and when partners and spouses moved for work, some WSPers abandoning their own work in order to follow them.<sup>67</sup> While sometimes exaggerating their domestic image in order to gain moral authority, many W.S.P. members held their responsibilities as housewives and mothers in high esteem, sometimes at the expense of their political activity.

In a sense, the later accounts given by WSPers shows that Women Strike for Peace had a positive impact on the lives of its members. Tallying with a tenet of women's liberation, activists recall feeling empowered and being part of a process of consciousness-raising. They took robust pride in the manner of protest and the work conducted. In many cases W.S.P.'s appeal to housewives did not simply empower women to take part in a demonstration or add their name to a mailing list, but encouraged them to develop their skills and further their lives in ways that must surely be seen to have fulfilled Friedan's appeal to American women. Thousands of grassroots members took up research duties, found an innate talent for it and ultimately became more knowledgeable about nuclear power issues than many in the U.S. Senate.<sup>68</sup> Many women became leaders within their communities. Some developed national personae that resulted in successful careers within American society. Wilson became an influential and sought-after figure within the American peace movement,

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<sup>63</sup> Wilson, "Tainting the Antinuclear Movement," 281.

<sup>64</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 58.

<sup>65</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, A1, Box 1 – "National Consultative Committee Minutes and Memos – 1965-July 1970."

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 4.

making speaking and television appearances alongside the likes of Benjamin Spock and Coretta Scott King. Abzug was propelled into the U.S. Congress primarily down to her status within and support from Women Strike for Peace, ultimately becoming a forceful and revered advocate for women's liberation. Taylor was subsequently asked to serve as a member of the International Women's Year Commission set up by President Carter. Barbara Bick continued her work for women's peace issues internationally through to the twenty-first century. Swerdlow moved into academia, earning a professorship and heading the women's history program at Sarah Lawrence University in New York, the first course of its kind anywhere in the world.<sup>69</sup> There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that members of Women Strike for Peace 'made a difference', despite obvious negative attitudes towards their use of domestic image. The initial empowerment afforded by an appeal to maternal instincts propelled W.S.P. members into fulfilling, rewarding careers, visible within the American mainstream, and certainly a far cry from what Friedan identified as 'the problem that has no name'. Naomi Goodman, a former member, wrote soon after the publication of Swerdlow's ground-breaking work that 'there was a song at one of the later W.S.P. gatherings which included words to the effect that we joined to help peace and found ourselves in the process'.<sup>70</sup> While enduring a second wave feminist backlash, there is reason to suggest that Women Strike for Peace gave much to the cause of Women's Liberation, even if just for its own membership.

Friedan wrote that domesticity and the identity of housewife and mother that came with it trapped American women. An examination of the rhetoric and image adopted by Women Strike for Peace illustrates the benefits achieved by an appeal to this demographic. Much like the work on women and war conducted by Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, this analysis demonstrates that the 'latent political power' of the institution of motherhood as appropriated by W.S.P. should not be overlooked.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, the memories produced by former activists frame the successes of the group through a lens of feminist political organising. Themes of empowerment, consciousness raising, community building and the emergence of women into the public political sphere all feature in recollections of Women Strike for Peace members. As such, it is reductive to conclude that their portrayal as 'just housewives' is negative and submissive. The relationship between Women Strike and feminism is certainly complex though. Swerdlow concluded that the group was 'basically feminist', but this betrays the contemporaneous pronouncements from W.S.P. members that put distance between themselves and feminism.<sup>72</sup> Her article 'Pure Milk, Not Poison' substantially redresses the feminist implications of W.S.P.'s protest, claiming that actually 'there was more of an anti-male element in W.S.P. than one would have expected', despite claims at the time that the

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<sup>69</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 4, 153; Taylor, *We Made a Difference*, 107; Barbara Bick, *Walking the Precipice: Witness to the Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2009); Suzanne Braun Levine and Mary Thom, *Bella Abzug: How One Tough Broad from the Bronx Fought Jim Crow and Joe McCarthy, Pissed Off Jimmy Carter, Battled for the Rights of Women and Workers, Rallied Against War and for the Planet, and Shook Up Politics Along the Way*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> American University, Washington, D.C., Archives and Special Collections; W.S.P. Papers, Box 1 – "Books About 1993/1994."

<sup>71</sup> Elshtain and Tobias eds., *Women, Militarism and War*, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Swarthmore College Peace Collection; W.S.P. Archives, C1, Box 3 – "Research on W.S.P. Conducted by Amy Swerdlow."

group was not in opposition to male leadership, per se.<sup>73</sup> Later memoirs and recollections from former activists indicate a personal redressing of the groups' feminist overtones. Taylor spoke of her belief that Women Strike's roundtable discussions heralded the consciousness raising experiences of later women's liberationists.<sup>74</sup> Comments arise in some recollections indicating a belief that W.S.P. members were trailblazers for second wave feminists. Simultaneously, though, Taylor clung steadfastly to her label as a housewife and mother. Her memoir records involvement in SANE, WILPF, the American Jewish Congress and Women Strike for Peace, yet the work conducted in these groups does not overshadow her domestic identity. Whether this is motivated by an attempt to emphasise W.S.P.'s position as underdogs and political outsiders or whether it is indicative of a confused relationship with feminism is unclear. It is insufficient to claim that WSPers saw themselves as 'just housewives'. Pride was maintained in that label throughout the lives of former activists who wished to be seen as both forthright political campaigners and mothers. The pride of past members who identified with domesticity beyond their association with Women Strike for Peace demonstrates that the role need not have been inherently repressive. This indicates a far more complex relationship between domesticity and the sphere of public politics and problematizes the critique made in by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.

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<sup>73</sup> Amy Swerdlow, "Pure Milk, Not Poison': Women Strike for Peace and the Test Ban Treaty of 1963," in *Rocking the Ship of State: Toward a Feminist Peace Politics*, eds. Adrienne Harries and Ynestra King (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989) 232.

<sup>74</sup> Ethel Taylor in *Peacework*, 10-18.