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HISTORY OF VOW

Voice of Women was founded in 1960 when women across Canada decided they must try to stop what appeared to be imminent nuclear war. The Summit Conference had collapsed and the Cold War was rapidly getting hotter. At that time we felt that women around the world must band together to demand an end to war. Groups like V.O.W. were formed in many countries and older groups were reactivated.

Voice of Women, which at the end of its first year numbered 6000 women from coast to coast, called an International Women's Conference to discuss the problem. Held in September 1962, it was the first meeting in Canada which included women from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The appeal from that conference was for the U.N. to designate a World Peace Year. Later when the idea was taken up by Prime Minister Nehru at the U.N., it resulted in 1965 being proclaimed International Co-operation Year.

Next VOW devoted its energies to campaigning and raising funds for the Canadian Peace Research Institute. It then supported the international call for a Test Ban Treaty which resulted in the partial Test Ban in 1963. VOW members were well aware of the dangers from radioactive fallout, having presented a brief to the Canadian Government on the subject and having participated in a research project in which they collected thousands of children's baby teeth for testing of their strontium 90 content. Also in 1963 a group of over 20 VOW members visited a number of European countries to discuss mutual problems with their women, and later attended the Moscow World Congress of Women.

In 1964, VOW members joined the NATO Women's Peace Force at the Hague and later went to Paris where women from all the NATO countries joined to protest the proposed multi-lateral nuclear force. Women from many countries also met to make plans for International Co-operation Year. Later many meetings and projects were undertaken with this theme in mind. VOW organised an International Student Camp, supported the International Children's Village project and held exhibitions and meetings in the interest of international co-operation.

Many VOW delegations went to Ottawa and to provincial legislatures urging government action towards peace and disarmament. VOW has played host to delegations of women from the Soviet Union and Indochina and held a Conference of Women for Peace during Canada's Centennial Year, attended by 300 women from 30 countries. On one occasion a delegation of 400 largely French speaking VOW members travelled to Ottawa on a Peace Train. They were incensed that no French speaking cabinet member was assigned to meet with them. The book "Dear Enemies" which was written by two VOW members who met on that trip, was one of the actions which led to the setting up of the Royal Commission on Biculturalism and Bilingualism. Some of VOW's techniques for maintaining communication between French and English speaking members were of some interest to the Commissioners. VOW also was one of the groups which called for, and later submitted briefs to, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Many VOW women are members of diverse organisations which have come into being long after the formation of VOW.

The prodigious use of natural resources on arms and war materials and the horrifying and on-going destruction of Vietnam, led VOW to begin investigating the dangers to the environment of oil and gas development in the North and to the lives and culture of our native people. Coupled with this concern was VOW's continuing concern for the effects of nuclear reactors to produce energy and the dangers of plutonium, the waste product of these reactors. This most deadly substance known to man cannot be destroyed and can have devastating effects on all living things for generations to come. VOW members viewed with growing concern the apparent reversal of priorities which places property and corporation profits above the value of human life and health.

VOW's involvement in trying to end the war in Vietnam and in providing humanitarian aid to the victims led to exchanges of visits with Vietnamese women and to the Ontario Voice of Women knitting project which over nearly ten years sent thousands of knitted garments and other aid to the children and other victims of the war. This project involved hundreds of women in the United States who had no other way to express their

concern for their country's destruction of Vietnam. VOW members also over the years took in and helped many young men who resisted the U.S. draft, or who had deserted rather than be party to their country's war policies. VOW has always had a close bond with American "peace" women. Many joint and lasting friendships have resulted from our common concerns for peace.

Women in many other countries have appealed for support and aid. VOW members have been involved in actions with the women of Greece, Cyprus, Indochina, Chile, Bolivia, Africa, Japan, India, Britain and many others. The use of the media and propaganda to stifle legitimate protests and exposure of injustice taught us how difficult it is to speak against powerful and influential interests. VOW members learned much about the political realities of our society and some went on to work in the field of human rights, welfare organizations, citizen's groups and in politics.

Many of the campaigns mounted by VOW have eventually been successful. The Vietnam war ended. Canada accepted diplomatic relations with China. Many politicians and citizen's groups are now questioning the dwindling of resources, the destruction of our environment, our vast expenditures on war planes and other materials. VOW still urges Canada to become a more independent nation, to disengage itself from the dominance of multi-national corporations and military alliances, to search for safer and less costly sources of energy than nuclear reactors. VOW maintains its interest in many diverse areas of concern and continues to welcome all women and men who share these concerns.

Written in 1976 by Kay Macpherson.

UPDATE OF VOW HISTORY

Since the above was written VOW has kept busy. For a few years membership declined but now there is a great renewal of interest in our concerns by women everywhere.

In 1978 VOW members participated in the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament held in New York, as a non-governmental organization. VOW presented a brief and attended sessions and it was an educational experience for all. Disappointingly although an excellent final document was prepared there has not been much progress on the disarmament front. We have continued to present briefs to External Affairs, pressing Canada to implement the Prime Minister's "Strategy of Suffocation" and on the subjects of foreign aid, the new international economic order, refugees and human rights, arms control, NATO and the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles, nuclear free zones, nuclear safeguards and against the renewal of the NORAD agreement.

1979 was International Year of the Child and Ontario VOW had an elementary school project, going in to schools with a lesson based on the rights of the child, with emphasis on "Peace and Brotherhood".

1980. VOW became more involved with other women's organisations and took part in International Women's Day activities in towns and cities across Canada.

Protests were mounted against the proliferation of nuclear power stations, including a hunger strike by two members in New Brunswick. B.C. was active in the Stop the Trident campaign and many other anti-nuclear activities.

1982 - the year of the Second Special Session on Disarmament, held in New York June 7th to July 9th. Before the Session, education of the public on the implications of nuclear war, disarmament in general and alternate ways of settling conflicts in a non-violent way was undertaken in co-operation with the many Disarmament networks in cities across Canada. A brief was submitted to the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence with regard to Canada's position at the Special Session. A statement from the Voice of Women was sent to the United Nations. Busloads of VOW members and friends went to New York for the June 12th Rally and returned overflowing with enthusiasm and ideas for future actions.

Over 125,000 signatures were collected from all across Canada on the Women's Petition for Peace, which was presented in Ottawa to women Senators and M.P.'s and then to the Secretary General of the U.N. in New York at the time of the Special Session. Halifax VOW co-ordinated this effort and were responsible for initiating our first "Mother's Day for Peace" campaign.

Protests against the testing of the Cruise missile in Alberta were started (and still continue). Alberta VOW helped organise a massive demonstration in that Province. Toronto holds a Vigil for disarmament at the US Consulate each Friday noon. There is a new petition in support of the Minority Report. Membership is growing.