**Entry type:** Organisation
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# Women for Survival

**Occupation** Anti-nuclear organisation, Non-violent organisation, Peace organisation

## Summary

Women For Survival was a national feminist peace coalition. It was formed in 1983, as an umbrella organisation to bring together the various feminist peace groups around Australia in order to coordinate the Pine Gap Women's Peace Camp planned for November that year. The two week vigil in November 1983 at Pine Gap, just outside of Alice Springs, sought to demonstrate support for the women of the peace camps at Greenham Common (United Kingdom) and Comiso (Italy), and to bring to public attention the secrecy of the US Base and Australia's vulnerability as a nuclear target. It maintained a philosophy of collectivity, consensus and collaboration, using non-violent direct action and creativity in its approach to protest.

WFS published a newsletter – *Survival News* – and held national conferences. Another national protest was organized the following year at Cockburn Sound in Western Australia – the Sound Women's Peace Camp in December 1984. Local actions by branches coincided with the peace camps, and continued in their involvement in protests against Salisbury Defence Centre (South Australia), Roxy Downs (South Australia), Lucas Heights (New South Wales), and the hosting of United States nuclear-capable warships. Women For Survival was part of an international women's peace movement at the end of the Cold War with the formidable threat of nuclear war.

## Details

Women For Survival was a national feminist peace coalition. It was formed in 1983, as an umbrella organisation to bring together the various feminist peace groups around Australia in order to coordinate the Pine Gap Women's Peace Camp planned for November that year. It initially included: Feminists Against Nuclear Energy (FANE) in Sydney, Feminist Anti-Nuclear Group (FANG) in Canberra and Adelaide, Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) in Perth, Campaign Against Nuclear Energy (CANE) in Perth and Adelaide, and Women's Action Against Global Violence (WAAGV) in Sydney which formed by Ananda Marga women. As Women For Survival (WFS), many more branches were established outside of the metropolitan centres, including in Townsville, Cairns, Atherton, Nimbin, Armidale, Uralla, Alice Springs, Darwin, Brisbane, and Hobart. The organization published regular newsletters – 'Survival News' – which were the edited by various branches on a rotational basis to update members on plans for the peace protest. Those members in Alice Springs had the responsibility of negotiating with the local community as well as planning the practicalities of the Pine Gap action. They liaised with local Indigenous groups out of respect and support for the Aboriginal land rights, and Aboriginal women participated in key moments of the protest. Some high profile Aboriginal activists like Shirley C. Smith, known as 'MumShirl', came from Sydney to lead the march on the first day beside local Indigenous women.

The two week vigil in November 1983 at the Joint Defence Space Research Facility at Pine Gap, just outside of Alice Springs, sought to demonstrate support for the women of the peace camps at Greenham Common (UK) and Comiso (Italy), and to bring to public attention the secrecy of the US Base and Australia's vulnerability as a nuclear target. Women For Survival felt that the base at Pine Gap symbolised global violence, being part of a continuum of violence against women and children systemically embedded in patriarchy and imperialism.

The protest was a massive organizational feat, which drew around 800 women to central Australia in the November desert heat. It was organized around principles of collectivity, consensus, and collaboration, with every woman belonging to an affinity group for support, security, decision-making processes and cooperative domestic tasks. Workshops before the protest were conducted on non-violent direct action, racism, the law, and media management.

It was a particularly creative culture, using dance, song, theatre, installation, silence, tea parties, balloon releases, workshops and speeches as modes of protest. A Double Our Numbers banner project enabled women who were unable to attend to paint themselves or a heroine life-sized on a banner, which was then taken to the event and displayed.

On November 13th women scrambled over the fence and held a Boston Tea Party on the green lawns of the Base. When they began walking toward the buildings 111 women were arrested for trespass, each giving their name as 'Karen Silkwood', an important anti-nuclear campaigner. The Peace Camp gained much media attention nationally and abroad, particularly the mass arrest. Complaints of police mistreated were made around the arrests, and a Human Rights Enquiry followed.

After the success of the Pine Gap action, the first of a number of annual national conferences was held in 1984 over the Easter in Adelaide. Another national action was planned for later that year: the Sound Women's Peace Camp. A Sound Women's Collective was formed and the event was organized through the Western Australian group, WAND. It was held in December 1984 at Point Perron in Cockburn Sound, near the HMAS Stirling Naval Base on Garden Island and close to Fremantle where nuclear capable US warships frequently docked and utilized the services of local women for 'rest and recreation'. An innovative Peace Train was organized with the railways and unions to bring women from the Eastern states for this action, but the costs became burdensome; the Peace train was transformed into a Road Train, a cavalcade of buses travelling together, but even this proved impossible to coordinate. The memory and idyll of the Peace Train remains however in posters and newsletter images, which are testament to its ingenuity. This was the last national peace camp, although national conferences continued for some years after.

Local actions continued to be organized by branches. For example, Adelaide WFS established a women's camp at Salisbury Defence Research Centre on International Women's Day for Disarmament on May 24, 1984. They were also involved in the Roxby Downs Blockade organized by Campaign Against Nuclear Energy (CANE). Sydney branches were similarly involved in actions at Lucas Heights. Darwin WFS picketed the wharf to prevent the export of uranium, Perth mounted protests against US navy warships docking, and Canberra rallied during the ALP conference in 1984. Branches conducted simultaneous actions during the national protests.

Members of Women for Survival members include Biff Ward, Briony Monahan and Barbara McLennan.

Archival material for WFS is lodged at the following (the first 3 contain the bulk of material):
Jessie Street National Women's Library (Sydney)
Melbourne University Archives (Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive)
Women's Studies Resource Centre, Adelaide
Fryer Library (UQ)
Murdoch University Library (GALAWA Collection)
James Cook University Library (Trewern Collection)
National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame (Alice Springs)
National Film and Sound Archive

## Published resources

**Resource**
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

## Archival resources

**National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection**
Elizabeth Ward interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

**NULL**
ACT Feminist Anti Nuclear Group - FANG - Collection - NJSN_AC-023

**The University of Melbourne Archives**
Women's Liberation Movement

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