

## How it all began: the Founding of Women's Worlds Congress and International Network

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*Abstract:* This paper will focus on the beginnings of the First International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women: Women's Worlds: The New Scholarship that was held at the University of Haifa in Israel (December 27, 1981- January 1, 1982. A short summary of the following six Congress and their themes, the founding of the World Organization of Women's Studies will also be presented. This will give us the background leading up to our celebration of Women's Worlds 2002 - The 8th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women: of Gendered Worlds: Gains And Challenges.

The *First International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women: Women's Worlds: The New Scholarship* was held at the University of Haifa in Israel (December 27, 1981- January 1, 1982. I was the founder and Chair and my Co-Chairs/founders were Martha Mednick, (Howard University) and Dafna Izraeli (Tel Aviv University.) To present the history and the development of this series of congresses, I must acquaint you with some personal history.

I arrived in Israel in 1968 with a new Ph.D. in psychology and the expectation to work in a modern egalitarian society that had dealt with the "Woman question" during the '20's. It quickly became clear that the status of women in Israel was less advanced than the US. However, most Israelis I spoke with, bought into the same myth of sex equality that had brought me to Israel and had no awareness of the problems around this issue (see Swirski & Safir, 1993.)

In order to develop awareness of the inequality within Israeli society, Marcia Freedman (who was latter elected to the Knesset on Shulamit Aloni's Citizen's Rights Party) and I began two consciousness raising (CR) groups in 1970, at the University of Haifa. Women from these two groups joined forces to establish a new Women's Liberation movement. We began to attract media attention. As a result, Martha Mednick, on sabbatical Israel in 1972, to study kibbutz women, read about the group and initiated a meeting. She told us about the new feminist scholarship taking hold in the U.S. Mednick planted the idea of Women's Studies in fertile ground.

Martha became my mentor, introducing me into the personal networks of U.S. and European feminist psychologists. When I started to receive requests from Israeli colleagues in other fields about existing feminist research in psychology, it became obvious that interdisciplinary communication was lacking. I discovered that feminist scholars worked in isolation and were unaware of each other's work, because of the absence of a national network. Women's Studies was nonexistent and unknown in Israeli academia. We were also at a disadvantage in keeping up with the latest research findings. Twenty years

ago, mail between Israeli cities took 10 days to 2 weeks and international mail a month, at best. Journals could take 3-4 months to be arrived from abroad – if they arrived at all. World wide, there were no computer networks or data bases - no online data. You had to search through printed abstracts for each related profession

In discussions with Mednick, it became obvious that lack of interdisciplinary communication was a problem in the U.S. as well. We continually discussed the need for an international, interdisciplinary congress that focused on scholarship on women. Finally, in 1979, we decided to do something about it. We proposed holding such a congress under the auspices of the American Psychological Association's Division 35 -Psychology of Women Council. We also proposed holding this Congress in Israel in order to make Israeli universities aware of and to create the ground work to establish WS programs. The Congress seemed to be a way to bring the message of the importance and developing stature of the new scholarship to this isolated place, as well as to create both Israeli and international network networks

Division 35 agreed to be a co-sponsor – but could only offer enthusiastic support and the snail mailing lists of the organization. Since no budget was available, it was stressed that we had to find other organizations to co-sponsor the congress. We were fortunate, because among the exec committee members were Florence Denmark, President-Elect of APA and Nancy Felipe Russo, who was the President of the Federation of Organizations of Professional Women (FOPW), composed of 110 organizations with branches all over the world. Nancy proposed that the Federation become a Co-sponsor. When we discussed names for the Congress, it was obvious to all of us that the “New Scholarship” would be the code word for feminist scholarship. Martha suggested that we use “Women's Worlds” in honor of Jessie Bernard's newest book that was about to be published. (Jessie joined the International Organizing Committee and agreed to be a Keynote speaker.) The first thing I did on my return was to contact the feminist scholars I knew and ask them to join the Israeli board and scientific committee. I also requested they ask their respective 5 universities to become co-sponsors. Only the University of Haifa – my home base - agreed to sponsor the Congress and more importantly, to host the meetings on its campus. However, Dafna Izraeli, who was at that time at Tel Aviv University joined me as Israeli Co-chair.

It is difficult to imagine the hardships of communication, both nationally and internationally in 1979, because poor postal service was some thing to contend with on a daily basis. To telephone internationally, you had to reach an operator and place the call – often waiting 2-3 hours for the call to go through. No direct dialing - no faxes or Internet. This was the framework from which we had to work both in planning the Congress and then in communicating with potential participants. When we received no response, we had to assume it might be that the person never received our correspondence. Many letters were sent two or three times. The new electronic highway has made networking much easier and congress organizing

more efficient. The impressive website that the Seventh Congress organizers created only to be surpassed by the organizers of Women's Worlds 2002 from the Department of Gender Studies at Makerere University – was not something we could conceptualize twenty years ago.

An International Organizing Committee (with major fundraising activities in New York City and Washington, D.C.) was formed and Mariam Chamberlain, of the Ford Foundation, granted seed money that enabled us to 'get the ball rolling.' The National Science Foundation awarded \$25,000 to be used for travel funds for young scholars. As powerful women joined the International Organizing Committee, they helped the organizing process by soliciting a large group of organizational Co-sponsors. The Division of the Psychology of Women, Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) and the Federation of Organizations of Professional Women (FOPW) took the lead. FOPW in particular provided a home and served as a funding conduit. Many of FOPW's organizations were very active in publishing information about the Congress in their newsletters. As I mentioned earlier, only hard copy was available for these announcements. Many other individuals and groups provided help with efforts to bring the congress to the attention of a wide range of the scholarly community. While these procedures seemed to work better for the social sciences than for other disciplinary groups, many disciplines were nevertheless represented.

The University provided me an office and help from the Public Relations Department and the administration. We were quickly inundated with inquiries from all over the world. It became obvious that this was a job that we could not handle on our own. So we chose a company that organized both congresses and touring arrangements. The Logo that has been used by all the Congresses was developed in cooperation with their graphic designer. Open calls for papers appeared in professional and interdisciplinary journals in throughout the world. Over 2000 inquiries were received – by snail mail, and over 400 abstracts were submitted to the Program. There were a total of 90 sessions at which 258 papers were presented. Six hundred and twenty three participants from 36 countries attended. A Congress directory was published listing all participants who had pre-registered both alphabetically and by country, including areas of interest for each registrant. A supplement was published during the Congress with the names of people who registered on site, to ease contact following the Congress. The Congress Directory, along with the names and addresses of all people who corresponded with us, formed the basis for the new international network. In fact, the letters and envelopes were packed in a suitcase and hand delivered to Christine Classon in the Netherlands.

The first Congress was unique in a number of ways. Historically, it was the first worldwide interdisciplinary congress to focus on research on women and to be open to all interested researchers and grass roots activists. There was no one organization sponsoring and running the meetings. It was, rather, an informal collection of individuals and professional organizations, joined together for the sole purpose of organizing the event. It was a feminist congress, not only in its scholarship but also in its very

conception and development. The Program Committee agreed at the outset to hold a non-elitist conference so as to reach the widest range of potential participants. We looked at the congress as a socializing experience for aspiring and up and coming researchers. Consequently, no abstract was rejected outright. When ever the criteria for acceptance were not met, reviewers asked for improvement or clarification, with an option to resubmit. The committee was rewarded for its efforts. In the majority of cases, the abstracts were resubmitted and integrated into the program. This extra effort had the effect of allowing many students and young scholars to participate. An attempt was also made to keep every session interdisciplinary and international.

Several specific international networks (i.e. Women in Management) were established as offshoots of the international network that was created. Another first, was inviting grass roots groups to present their projects in Poster Sessions to enable them and academics to network during these sessions. While causing some difficulties to the organizers, registration fees were charged on a sliding scale to enable participants from the developing world, students and grass root volunteers to attend. To enable participation of community women and people of limited funds, Haifa residents provided free lodging in their homes to many participants who could not afford to pay hotel fees. Tours were offered to all the grass-roots projects in and around Haifa for interested participants. Many Haifa residents invited participants to their homes for a social evening, as well.

The First Congress had an international impact. There were glowing news articles on the front page of the New York Times, in Time Magazine and in newspapers in most of the participants' home countries. We were sent articles in Japanese, Greek, French, Spanish, from Latin America, from Africa, etc. This increased the impact in Israel. The Israeli media was flooded with reports, interviews and photos. The Congress had specific impact on the development of feminist scholarship in Israel. In 1982, Hebrew University started a program on Sex Differences in Society. In 1983, the University of Haifa inaugurated the first Women's Studies program and in 1984, Project Kidma for the Advancement of Women - an out reach program originally for community women. In 1984, the Israel Sociological Association also established a section on Sex and Gender. An Israeli contingent has continued to attend all the subsequent Congresses.

On the final day, Matti Kubrick Gershenfeld called a general meeting to evaluate the Congress and to discuss the future. Over 100 people attended. All enthusiastically agreed that this should be "The First" in a series of congresses. Some suggested that an international organization be formed to take responsibility for and sponsorship of continuation of the Congress. However, the general feeling was that to maintain the momentum created in this First Congress, another university should take responsibility for organizing the next Congress. Donna Shalala, at that time, President of Hunter College, immediately offered Hunter College's facilities. However, there was general agreement that it was to soon to take the Congress to the

U.S if we wanted to continue to encourage and develop the international flavor It was agreed to hold the congress only in countries that would give visas to all participants world-wide. A call for bids went out and of the four bids received, the University of Groningen, the Netherlands was chosen by a committee composed of the Congress Chair, Co-chairs and Congress board from several countries. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress Chair was Christine Classon and Co-Chair, Helen Hootsman. This Congress theme was *Strategies and Empowerment*. Close to 800 participants attended. As there had been Irish involvement in organizing the First Congress, there was interest in holding a Congress in Dublin. Trinity College made the bid that was accepted for the third Congress in 1987. This Congress was organized by a collective: Mary Cullen, Audrey Dickson, Margeret Fine-Davis, Sylvia Meehan and Geraldine Maone. Its theme was *Visions and Revisions*. The number of attendees jumped. The organizers were able to attract approximately 2,000 grassroots participants and about 1,400 academics. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress took over Dublin during this period. Hunter College in New York City became the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress' venue in 1990 with its theme: *Realities and Choice* and was chaired by Florence Denmark and Susan Lees. This was another huge congress with similar number of participants to the Dublin Congress. However, N.Y. swallowed the Congress and there was much less impact. From there the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress went to the University of Costa Rica in San Jose, where it was chaired by Mirta Gonzalez- Saurez in 1993: this theme was Search, Participation, Change. There were over 1,000 participants with a large contingent from South and Central America. The Congress and participants again had a strong impact on San Jose. The University of Adelaide, Australia hosted the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1996- *Think Global, Act Local*, which was Chaired by Susan Magarey, and was attended by over 1000 participants The 7<sup>th</sup> Congress, whose theme was Generations, was chaired by Gerd Bjorhovde at University of Tromso in 1999 with a 1100 participants whose presence could be felt all over Tromso. Now, we are here at Makerere University to discuss Gendered Worlds: Gains and Challenges. Many thanks to Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo and her team from the Women and Gender Studies Department and all the officials and staff at Makerere University for making WW 2002 possible. (*presentation?*)

The networking that began around the WW's congress began to spread. The time and facilities were not right to form an international organization to organize future congresses at the first congress. However by 1985, the time was right for the concept and the development a worldwide association of women's studies organizations. This concept was presented at the NGO Forum of the United Nations in 1985 in Kenya. Both Tobe Levin and Erna Kas raised the idea at different NGO meetings in the Nairobi conference. At a breakfast meeting, Tobe Levin met with Jalna Hanmer, Maitreyi Krishna-Raj, Gloria Bonder, and Peggy McIntosh. They discussed the importance of an international organization. However, a decision was made that the first step would be the formation of a European WS association which would latter becomes WISE (Women's International Studies Europe). A follow up meeting in 1987 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> WW in Dublin gave further impetus to the establishment of WISE as did grants in 1988 and 9 from the ECU (Levin,

1992). Because of EU funding, membership was originally limited to WS associations from member states. Judith Ezekiel pushed for the inclusion of non EU membership. She also suggested the name WOWS and began lobbying for WOWS establishment at the Vienna preparatory conference for Beijing. At the NGO meetings in Beijing in 1995, WISE proposed the establishment of a world-wide organization. They were joined by the National Women's Studies Association of the USA. So Judith Ezekiel and Erna Kas of WISE and Claire Moses of NWSA organized a series of workshops. One hundred and sixty five women from 43 countries joined hands to endorse the creation of a worldwide organization of feminist/women's studies associations (Erna Kas, personal communication 15/7/02).

As the Beijing sessions were such smashing success, it was decided to have an official founding meeting at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women in Adelaide and WOWS was officially launched at that Congress. The first General Assembly meeting of founding members was held in Tromsø at the 7<sup>th</sup> Women's Worlds Congress. Now the time had come: rather than the organizers of the WW Congresses and the individual universities that served as hosts deciding on the venue for the following congress, WOWS formed a site-selection committee for the next conference (Erna Kas, op cit). Up to this point in time, the internet was still not a functional option for most of the world. In fact, the first spectacular Website and electronic network was created by the Tromsø Organizers. After the Congress, WOWS sent out a call for proposals to organize the next conference. Makerere University was chosen for the 2002 Congress site.

Holding the next meeting in 2005 in Asia appears to have priority, in part because few participants from Asia have managed to attend earlier conferences – not even to the meeting in Australia was a large Asian presence was anticipated. The 9<sup>th</sup> Congress' site will be official announcement at the end of this conference. All are invited to the session that WOWS will host at -----, in particular representatives of WS organizations since WOWS is an organization composed of only one WS organization from each country and not individual members. Hats off to all the wonderful women who made these congresses a reality, to the WISE Women and now to WOWS

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