

Organizing International Women's Conferences: The Founding of Women's Worlds Congress and International Network

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In order to begin this history, I must spend a few minutes acquainting you with my personal history which led to the conception of and the actual First International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women: Women's Worlds – The New Scholarship. This congress was held at the University of Haifa in Israel (December 27, 1981-January 1, 1982, Chaired by myself and Co-Chaired by Martha Mednick, (Howard University) and Dafna Izraeli (Tel Aviv University).)

I arrived in Israel in 1968 with a new Ph.D. in psychology and the expectation to work in a society that had dealt with the "Woman Question" during the '20's. I discovered myself isolated on several counts. It quickly became clear that the status of women in Israel was less advanced than the US. However, the 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. In addition, I was a clinician that used the newest techniques in psychotherapy (Cognitive-behavioral) in a field that was influenced by psychodynamic therapy of the 50's – but this is another story..

In order to confront the inequality within Israeli society, two CR groups were begun in 1970 at my university composed in large part by English speaking newcomers and sabres. Participants from these two groups joined forces to establish a Women's Liberation movement. Women from these early CR groups also helped establish new CR groups. They traveled to Tel Aviv (a three hour bus trip) to help establish CR and women's lib groups there. Our group continued to be at the forefront. An early project, besides public demonstrations, entailed the examination of gender stereotypes in first through third grade readers. Our group began to attract media attention. As a result, Martha Mednick, in Israel in 1971/2 to study kibbutz women, heard about the group and initiated a meeting. She talked about the new feminist scholarship. Mednick planted the idea of Women's Studies and the Psychology of Women in fertile ground.

Martha became my mentor introducing me into the networks of U.S. and European feminist psychologists. When I started to receive requests from colleagues in other fields about existing feminist research in psychology, it became obvious that communication across fields was lacking. We were at a disadvantage in keeping up with the latest findings as Israel was out of the loop. If we take a time machine back twenty years – we find that post between Israeli cities took 10 days to 2 weeks and international mail a month. Journals could take 3-4 months to arrive – if they arrived at all. There were no computers and no online data. You had to search through abstracts for each related profession. About 25% of homes were not attached to the telephone infrastructure. 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 and no faxes or Internet.

In discussions with Martha, lack of interdisciplinary communication was a problem in the U.S. as well. We talked about the need for an international, interdisciplinary congress and finally in 1979 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) at the executive council meeting.

We also proposed having this meeting in Israel in order to have impact on the Universities to make them more conducive to the establishment of WS programs. I had discovered that Israeli feminist scholars usually 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 academia. Holding such a 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 mailing lists of the organization. Since no budget were available, it was stress to us that we had to find other groups 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 allover the world. Nancy would propose that the Federation become a co-sponsr . The Exec. committee suggest that I chair the Congress as it would be held in Israel and that Martha co-chair and be the American Liason. I proposed that we ask all five israeli universities to co sponsor the congress. I had no doubts that all would be as enthusiasitic as I was. Only the University of Haifa – my home base - agreed to sponsor the Congress and to host the meetings on its campus. The first thing I did on my return was to contact the scholars I knew and ask them to join the Israeli board and scientific committee. With the first agreements I made up the “call for papers” Tranparency I. This tranparency reveals my attempt at designing a logo and Congress sationnary. Dafna Izraeli who ,at that time at Tel Aviv University was as fervent as I was and joined me as israel Cochair.

As the International Organizing Committee was formed seed money was received from the Ford foundation., the congress organizing process was helped considerably by a large group of organizational cosponsors of which the Division of the Psychology of Women 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 other individuals and groups provided help with efforts to bring the congress to the atention of a wide range of the scholarly community. While this procedure seemed to work better for the social sciences than for otherdisciplinary groups, many disciplines were nevertheless represented (trnacpaerncy 2)

The University gave tme an office for the Congress and help from the Public Relations Department and members of the administration. We were quickly inundated with inquires from all over the world. It became obvious that this was a job that we could not handel on our own and so we chose a professional copmpany to take over the administrative aspects of the Congress. The Logo that has appered for all the congresses was developed in cooperation with their graphic designer. Over 2000 inquiries were received – by snail mail. From the Congress directory and these inqiries , the international network was begun. In fact, tthese letters and envelopes we packed in a suitcase and hand delivered to Christine Clason – the Chair of the 2nd Congress.

Norway has ties from the very beginning.. Berit Aas, a Norweign Psychologist joined the International Organizing committee was a Keynoter. There were 623 participants from 36 countries who came to attend and to present. There were a total of 90 sessions at which 258 papers were presented. The congress was unique in a number of ways. In historical perspective it was the first international interdisciplinary congress to focus on research on women and to be open to all interested scholars. It

was a feminist congress, not only in its scholarship but in its very conception and development. It was a product of the new era of women's intellectual achievement. 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. Open calls for papers appeared in professional and interdisciplinary journals in Europe and North and South America, and over 400 abstracts were submitted to the organizing committee.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of the congress on the individual participants; however, the impact on the development of feminist scholarship in Israel is easier to document. In 1982 the Hebrew University started a program on Sex and Gender in Society and in 1983 the University of Haifa inaugurated a Women's Studies program. In 1984 the Israel Sociological Association established a section on Sex and Gender.

In Israel itself, the cross-discipline effort was most successful. Perhaps the forming of a widely based local committee helped, not to mention the small size of the community. The congress organizing committee agreed at the outset to apply feminist principles and hold a nonelitist meeting so as to reach a wide range of scholars. The congress was looked upon as a socializing experience for aspiring and upcoming scholars. Consequently no abstract was rejected outright. Wherever 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.

There were the organizational sponsors, the Ford Foundation, and National Science Foundation, which granted administrative and travel money, respectively, and the Mount Carmel Training Institute, whose government (Israeli) funded workshop enabled participation by women from developing countries.