A Note on Women's Studies at Houston

Phyllis Palmer

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chair of the Sunday session, the agenda had been moving along briskly; the press was still there in force.

The resolution was read by Jean O'Leary, Co-Executive Director of the National Gay Task Force, IWY Commissioner from New York and the only Commissioner to identify herself as a lesbian. The debate that followed, frequently forced back to order by Saunier, was probably the most lively and substantive of the conference. The opposing arguments were predictable: an affirmative vote would be "self-indulgent at this time," destroy the chances for ERA, split the movement by attaching to it a label that many had been struggling to dissociate themselves and the movement from. To this charge there were many logical replies: Betty Powell spoke of lesbian invisibility, which "like the invisibility of all minorities negatively perceived by society has for so long fostered only ignorance of our persons, our values, our actual lifestyles, and also ignorance of the effect of legal, social, and economic discrimination upon our lives. We have all of us—Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, and White, old, young, imprisoned, and disabled—began to see ourselves and each other more clearly. Clearest of all is the fact that the oppressions we suffer, as distinct and varied as they are, stem universally from the condition of simply being women in this world." Charlotte Bunch defined lesbianism as "more than sexual preference; it is a matter of civil rights, a life-style... the vote is for all women who are controlled by fear of being called a lesbian." And Betty Friedan, silencing the hall, turned the tide: "There is nothing in ERA to protect lesbians, and so we must allow them to be protected in their own civil rights."

**Significant Energy for the Future**

The rights of women in poverty were the final task of the day. With the passage of a strong amendment for welfare women—"Welfare First—We're Always Last," read their placards—the major work of the conference was over. Voting on a Women's Department and preliminary discussion of implementation remained for the last plenary session.

Significantly, then, the Houston conference confirmed the rights of a number of groups of women, and in so doing acknowledged their full membership in the movement. Far from splitting the conference or the movement, such actions may have healed it. The enormous joy that was perhaps the most keenly felt especially by lesbian women and minority women will provide significant energy for the future. For those watching national patterns, Houston left the women's movement far more alive than anyone, prior to Houston, had expected.

**Phyllis Palmer**

**A Note on Women's Studies at Houston**

The National Women's Studies Association and the Women's Studies Program at George Washington University formally sponsored a series of discussions held in Seneca Falls South, the program and public assembly area of the National Women's Conference, under the title *Finding Our History: Studies in American Women*. The discussions, which were scheduled hourly during the day on Saturday and Sunday, were led by members of various women's studies programs and covered a range of academic issues, from "Lesbianism and Women's Studies" to "Welfare Women" and "The Economics of Discrimination." The sessions were centered around a library that included both monograph and journal literature on women's issues, as well as pamphlets and brochures from the National Association and various women's studies programs.

The sessions were organized at the request of Fran Henry at the IWY national office, after she talked with Virginia Allan and me at George Washington University and expressed her concern that most of the National Conference program focused on "how-to" get various things done and did not provide places to discuss substantive questions. After deciding that women with academic skills could lead sessions in which information would be provided, discussion stimulated, and argument focused, the only problem, in mid-October, was to figure out how to organize the 30 or so people necessary and to get them to Houston (at their own expense) in time for the November meeting. Quick calls to Florence Howe and Elaine Reuben yielded the names of active programs and sympathetic individuals in the Southwest who might be able to get themselves to Houston.

The next step was to begin calling people, most of whom were excited and enthusiastic and polled their programs and bargained with administrators for travel funds with remarkable speed. Especially helpful were Gale Baker at the University of New Mexico, which sent 15 faculty and students, Myra Dinnerstein at the University of Arizona, Mary Rothschild at Arizona State University, Annette Allen at Southern Methodist University, Jeanne Ford at the University of Texas/Arlington, Melissa Hield at the University of Texas/Austin, Shauna Adix at the University of Utah, Carol Pearson at the University of Maryland, Nan Bruckner at the University of Houston, and Margaret and Harold Feldman at Cornell University. By the afternoon of November 4, when all information had to be ready for the IWY Conference printer, Fran Henry was given a women's studies program that included 24 discussions of a varied range of issues addressed in women's studies courses.

Fran Henry's response to seeing a program molded into form in less than one month was that it proved how much life and energy and organization existed in numbers of women's studies programs around the country. Certainly, my experience in calling directors of programs at a variety of institutions was the same, along with gratitude for how quickly and easily and with so little fuss and quibbling people in programs organized themselves and responded. And, as most of us who were involved felt, both before and during the Houston meeting, much of our ability
to create a women's studies session came from the existence of the National Association, from our sense of mutuality, and from the contacts and trust that have been built with the Association.

A Sense of Strength

The experience in Houston confirmed all the good feelings that most of us brought to the meeting. Those of us who came as women's studies people were eager and ready to talk with one another, feeling a common interest, and people on the program were joined by other women's studies faculty who saw the program listed in the conference schedule and dropped by to talk and to look for acquaintances and friends. We were joined by many people who were interested in how to set up a Women's Studies Program, how to get more material on women taught outside university settings, and how to pursue research interests. We couldn't always provide answers, of course, but we did have a sense of strength in having thought about some of the questions and problems raised, and having begun the process of confronting some of them in our own institutions and in the National Association. Finally, the sessions reminded us of how much we already do know and confirmed a sense that our strength derives from working and sharing with one another.

If we have one strong feeling that most of us brought to the meeting, it is that such occasions for talking with one another about our work and our political situations are valuable and essential. I realize that this description is so euphoric as to be unbelievable, but Houston had that effect on me and the women's studies people who came. We left feeling exhilarated about women's studies, confident of our academic worth, and enheartened about the future of the Association. That is what I would like the readers of the Newsletter to know.

Resolutions Adopted by Delegates to the National Women's Conference

By now the Houston conference of November 18 to 21, 1977, is history. For the convenience of our readers, we print below those eight resolutions amended or substituted or added at the conference. Eighteen other resolutions were adopted without alteration, on the following subjects: Arts and Humanities; Battered Women; Business; Child Abuse; Child Care; Credit; Elective and Appointive Office; Employment; Equal Rights Amendment; Health; Homemakers; Insurance; International Affairs; Media; Offenders; Reproductive Freedom; Sexual Preference; Statistics.

For copies of all resolutions in the official conference program, the historic IWY tabloid, and the 1976 IWY Report, "...To Form A More Perfect Union...", send a donation of $3.00 (plus $.50 postage) to IWY Commission, PO Box 1567, Washington, DC 20013. T-shirts and posters are also available.

DISABLED WOMEN (substitute)

The President, Congress, and state and local governments should rigorously enforce all current legislation that affects the lives of disabled women.

The President, Congress, and Administration should expeditiously implement the recommendations of the White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals and develop comprehensive programs for that purpose.

Disabled women should have access to education, training, and employment based on their needs and interests rather than on the preconceived notions of others.

Disabled women should have the right to have and keep their children and have equal rights to adoption and foster care.

The Congress should mandate health training and research programs focused on the health needs of the disabled.

Information developed by disabled women should be disseminated to medical professionals and women so that all women can make decisions about children based on knowledge rather than fear.

National health care legislation must provide for the unique requirements of disabled women without reference to income.

The Congress should enact legislation to remove all work disincentives for all disabled individuals who wish paid employment.

The President and Congress should work closely with disabled individuals in the development of the welfare reform act and all other legislation concerning disabled persons.

Medicaid and Medicare should cover all the medical services and supplies that are needed by disabled women.

The President and Congress should encourage all states to utilize Title XX funds for the provision of attendant care and other such service for disabled women.

The President and Congress should enact legislation to include disabled women under the 1964 Civil Rights Act and afford them judicial remedy.

The President and Congress and International Women's Year must recognize the additional discrimination disabled women face when they are members of racial, ethnic, and sexual minority groups, and appropriate steps must be taken to protect their rights.

In the passage of the National Plan of Action, the word "Woman" should be defined as including all women with disabilities. The term "bilingual" should be defined as including sign language and interpreters for the deaf. The term "barriers"...

Congress should appropriate sufficient funds to ensure the development of service programs controlled by disabled people.

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