Spring 1981

Women's Studies International at Copenhagen: From Idea to Network

Florence Howe

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/546

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
is applicable to our diverse colleges and universities, but if general education requirements are necessary in order to lead students into the humanities classroom, do not shrink from them. In 1950, 10 percent of all undergraduate majors in American colleges and universities were history majors; today the figure is 2 percent. Thus, we are not reaching 98 percent of all students through our specialized offerings. Unless we can reach them through general studies courses, they will have no chance of hearing what we want them to hear, no matter how well conceived and well taught our courses might be. Historians have the capacity to be generalists par excellence; they ought to advocate and staff general education courses.

Second, fight to see that your general education courses in the humanities are not bound by the ideals of the public, the genres, and the melting pot. Some kinds of help are available: Lewis and Clark College has received foundation funding for summer faculty renewal seminars for its own Western Civ instructors; the University of Arizona has begun a three-year faculty development program to transform its basic introductory course; programs for educating faculty to teach gender-balanced general education courses have been set up at Wellesley College, Georgia State, and Montana State. But again, in my view, resolution of the central intellectual issue, not tinkering, is prerequisite to lasting gains for women in the general humanities curriculum.

Third, get in on the ground floor if you can, so that general education courses mandated for your students will be gender-balanced from the outset. Since this is sometimes impossible, I advise supporting the reinstatement of traditional, unreconstructed, sexist courses rather than none. This is highly debatable advice. It may prove impossible to change such a course once it is established; if so, I will be proved wrong. This is precisely where we stand at Stanford. Many of us feminist humanists supported actively the introduction of something we knew we wanted to change. We did so because of our commitment to the importance of studying the humanities. We did so because we did not want our vision of the best to drive out our chance at grasping the good; but we weren’t without hope of moving toward perfection.

Carolyn C. Lougee is an Associate Professor of History at Stanford University.

---

**Women’s Studies International at Copenhagen: From Idea to Network**

*By Florence Howe*

Almost a year before the United Nations’ Mid-Decade Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen during the summer of 1980, Mariam Chamberlain of The Ford Foundation, Amy Swerdlow, Myra Dinnerstein, and I began informal discussions about holding meetings of women’s studies practitioners there. When we learned that an NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) Forum would be organized, I wrote to sixty women’s studies practitioners outside the United States, informing them of the badly-publicized NGO Forum itself, and inviting them to contribute to the planning of women’s studies seminars. Eventually, The Feminist Press, the U.S. National Women’s Studies Association, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University in Montreal, and the S.N.D.T. Women’s University in Bombay, India, agreed to act as sponsors of women’s studies sessions, and the May issue of the U.S. Women’s Studies Newsletter further spread the word.

From the beginning, the idea of what might be done in Copenhagen was both modest and practical: to make use of an extended occasion during which an international group might be able to meet to talk about women’s studies. Planners assumed also that it would be useful to share resource materials, and, of course, to include a formal “registry” for participants so that the dialogue might continue afterwards.

Because planning began with only rudimentary knowledge of what women’s studies practitioners were doing in India, Canada, and several European countries, we envisioned a program that would function in a coherent, yet flexible, fashion. It would include three kinds of sessions: on research and methodology; on teaching and curriculum; and on the texts used in teaching. While sessions on research and teaching might focus on higher education, the session on texts would be concerned with elementary and secondary education, including literacy for adults. At the suggestion of several UNESCO staff members and other international participants, we added a fourth group of sessions—on public policy. We assumed that a group of approximately thirty persons would meet for several days on each topic, either in large sessions or in smaller interest groups. And, of course, we assumed that these participants would also attend other sessions of the Forum.

The Forum was planned for ten days in July 1980 at a site near but not convenient to the official meeting of the United Nations’ Mid-Decade Conference on Women. Its planners had hoped to avoid a repetition of some aspects of the Mexico City U.N. Conference’s Tribune, at which large groups held meetings that attracted the mass media and projected controversial political statements in the Tribune’s name. Thus, the Copenhagen Forum was organized in an institution without facilities for mass meetings, the Amager University Center, and the building was closed at night and on weekends. While the planners attempted to use the modern, horizontal facility imaginatively, the crowds
were far larger than expected. The Forum attracted some eight to ten thousand people during these ten days, most of them during the first week, and the Amager Center became a confusing tangle of displays, hawkers, and tired and frustrated people unable to find their friends or the sessions that they had hoped to catch.

In many instances, they did not know what sessions it was possible to catch. The Forum’s staff was inadequate to prepare a daily program. Room numbers were inaccurately announced, the names of participants never appeared, and the specific titles of sessions were often as not omitted. Not once during the ten days of the Forum’s sessions did even a small article about the international women’s studies meetings appear, despite our preparation of several lengthy news releases. All Forum participants suffered in the same manner and resorted to the same devices: flyers and posters plastered the entrances, halls, doors, and pillars; staff members made announcements in the various sections of future sessions; and leaflets were run off by the hundreds and handed out whenever possible. Luckily, we had three thousand copies of our program in English, French, and Spanish, prepared in advance with the assistance of NWSA and the Simone de Beauvoir Institute.

Problems of space and location were almost as severe as problems of communication. Since the Amager University Center contained only one room large enough to hold more than two hundred people, that room was very much in demand. It was assigned to us for opening and closing sessions, and we filled it both times. For two other major sessions—one teaching and one on texts—we were assigned smaller rooms, difficult to find and lacking translation facilities. Fewer people attended these sessions: about forty on curriculum (higher education), and about fifty on texts (primary and secondary education).

Our eighteen Roundtables, our Resource Center, and our Registry were located in the Police Academy, one long city block away from the Amager University Center, and it required some ingenuity, along with some willingness to leave the scene of action and information, as well as food and other comforts, to find us. Despite the obstacles of inadequate communication and poor location, some three hundred persons managed to find their way to these sessions, and into the Registry. In addition to them, some two hundred others also attended the larger sessions in the Amager building and signed our attendance sheets. What were the ingredients for this achievement? There were three: the initial planning and the experienced staff that took responsibility for the day-to-day management of the program and continued to draw others into the net of responsibility; the program itself, which, in a manner we had not anticipated, attracted a core group of continuous participants; and, ultimately, a reason we could not have predicted or arranged, the broad and deep interest of the international community in women’s studies.

We had, in fact, planned a mini-conference within a large happening, not because we knew that the Forum would be chaotic for those who came expecting something more organized, but because we were attempting to meet with people interested in women’s studies for dialogue. The arrangement of the program allowed for continuity in two ways. First, the large sessions called Seminars were followed by relevant, smaller Roundtables; and, in each case, some of the Seminar speakers were scheduled to be present at the Roundtables. In fact, a core of more than twenty persons attended almost all Roundtables, providing a promise of additional continuity. Dialogue could continue from session to session. Furthermore, new sessions were organized out of scheduled ones on three occasions when two hours proved inadequate to the dialogue; and, in each case, “new” people both organized and chaired the new Roundtables, and other people took responsibility for publicizing them.

Madhu Kishwar of New Delhi, historian and editor of Manushi: A Journal of Women and Society, who, with Amy Swerdlow, offered a Roundtable at Copenhagen called “Women’s Studies Reconceptualizes History." Photograph by Florence Howe.
There is no neat way to summarize all the sessions. Most were taped, and much of the dialogue is interesting. But perhaps a glimpse of the Opening Seminar, called "Research: Developing a Body of Knowledge about Women—for Women," and the Roundtables that followed, will suggest the impact of the whole. When this opening session began, in the largest room of the Amager Center, and with official translation, the room was full; and though we did not know it at the time, the session was to be remarkable, in that all those attending stayed for the entire program, without the Forum's characteristic traffic at the backs of rooms. Following my brief introductory remarks about Women's Studies International and the state of women's studies in both the industrialized and developing worlds, four panelists spoke—two from developing countries, one from Europe, and one from the United States.

Vina Mazumdar, Director of the new Center for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, began with a bit of autobiography that described her initiation into research on women about a decade ago. She urged upon social scientists the humility to know what they did not yet have a grasp of, and the energy to begin to develop strategies for uncovering the complex "layering" responsible both for women's inferior social status and for the strength with which they have survived thousands of years of oppression.

Laura Balbo, Director of the Group for Research on the Family and Feminism (GRIFF) at the University of Milan, described the condition of women in Italy and the nature of research undertaken by GRIFF about a decade ago that led both to the revision of the sociology curriculum to include a scientific study of the family, and to teaching about women in the university and outside in trade unions. Gloria Bonder fulfilled a similar assignment, focusing especially on Argentina and the paucity there of research on women, but also attempting to review the needs for research on women throughout Latin America. She also described the new Center for the Study of Women in Buenos Aires, of which she is the Director. Hanna Papanek, U.S. sociologist, the panel's final speaker, reviewed and critiqued social science methodology, especially as it impinged on studies of women and work. Following her talk, for more than half an hour, we heard questions and comments from the audience, some of whom identified themselves as being from Bulgaria, Bangladesh, Denmark, Spain, and Brazil.

The Roundtables that followed in the next several days were, on the whole, extraordinary for their vitality and intensity. The three that had been scheduled spawned three others. Those scheduled were called "Research Centers on Women—for Women," "Sex Roles and Social Policy," and "Feminism and the New Scholarship." The three new sessions were: (a) a continuation, during the same afternoon, of the first Roundtable—which meant that some participants had engaged themselves in WSI dialogue for eight hours; (b) a new session called "Is There a Women's Studies Research Methodology?"; and (c) "Women's Research in Developing Countries," held on Monday of the second week.

Participants typically included a few persons from the United States, more from Europe, and a good sprinkling of those from developing countries. It was rare that Roundtables functioned with fewer than thirty participants, and several of the research-centered ones crowded sixty into a room meant for thirty. In all but a few cases, the Roundtables opened with at least brief, informal remarks by several announced participants. On occasion, these were brilliant mini-papers that provoked extended discussion both during the Roundtable and informally afterwards, at least in part because they had "universal" impact and implications. A paper by Gloria Bonder on self-imposed barriers to women's productive research, though focused on women researchers in Argentina, sparked assent from all the researchers in the room, whatever their nationality. It was one of those rare moments in which some national borders became nonexistent. A similar moment occurred in another Roundtable, when Helga Hernes of Norway described the reluctance with which she had begun to work on a research project that involved older women who were not connected to or involved in feminism; her fear that they wouldn't accept her; and then the strong relationship that developed between her and the group.

For the twenty persons who attended most of the eighteen different sessions, there was the daily anticipation—after the first few days especially—of meeting in sessions and hearing from women's studies practitioners, or from those beginning to be interested in women's studies, from all over the world. No continent was without a representative, and almost none of the fifty-five countries was without someone doing research on women. Interest in teaching—at all levels, and in literacy programs—was high. And sometimes, rather unusual people frequented the Resource Center: a male director of a medical school in Western Australia, for example, wanting information about new curricular strategies for teaching about women to medical students; a policymaker from Finland, wanting to have samples of the best school texts about women's work, for possible introduction into a new educational plan for girls; a citizen of Switzerland, wanting to learn as much as possible about women's studies so that she might help her delegates to the U.N. Mid-Decade Conference introduce resolutions relevant to improving the education of women and girls.

In the main, of course, those frequenting the Center and
sessions were women’s studies practitioners—teachers at all levels, researchers on women, and students, including doctoral candidates doing their dissertations on women. Key researchers from Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, and other countries came with their research documents in hand to contribute to the Resource Center. And women’s studies practitioners shared a variety of resources as well as problems. A political scientist from Brazil, for example, wanted to know how to teach an Introduction to Women’s Studies course when, in fact, most of the useful materials she had seen were available in English and her students needed them in Portuguese. An elementary school teacher from Brussels, who also edits a feminist newsletter for teachers, urged us to tell U.S. feminists that eliminating sexism in U.S. textbooks would be of use to Belgian schoolgirls, since the illustrations for elementary school readers were purchased relatively inexpensively from U.S. publishers, and Belgian texts written around them. A group of Japanese schoolteachers came to display and talk about a new study of sexism in Japanese school texts. And a researcher from Zimbabwe brought a text she had prepared on Women in Zimbabwe that was currently in use in schools.

The idea that the name of the program—Women’s Studies International—might become, in reality, a “network” was expressed on the very first day by two participants to whom I was apologizing for the omission of the names of sponsoring institutions in official NGO Forum documents. Indeed, in all the official packets prepared by the NGO Forum planners, only the words “Women’s Studies International” appeared, as though that were the name of an organization. At first, I was mystified, then annoyed and worried lest the sponsors find the omission of their names a serious problem to be dealt with back home. Indeed, that was potentially a problem for Mair Verthuy, Director of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University in Montreal. But she and Vina Mazumdar suggested that the error might be turned to some use, since a Women’s Studies International Network would be desirable, at least from their own national perspectives.

The question from the start for me and other U.S. women’s studies practitioners was a matter of time: should we whose energies are, after all, limited at least by time, divert our attention away from our own country to the rest of the world? Second, of course, there was the equally relevant consideration: did the rest of the world need our attention? Could we be productive if, abroad, we were regarded with suspicion, if not hostility, about our intentions? One of the reasons for our modest plans and expectations was, in fact, that we were uncertain of our welcome in an international setting.

Apart from being welcome, there is the very real question of being useful. We believe in women’s studies as an essential strategy for educational change, ultimately useful in all countries. But how useful is it at this moment, when in many places access is still the major educational issue for girls and women? Would we be helping those, moreover, whose most pressing needs are not for education, but for water, adequate health care, even for basic nutrients for themselves and their children, and for employment? We asked those questions to begin with, and we are asking them again at this time. But, interestingly, through the WSI sessions, those questions were not raised in these ways. Indeed, those who attended WSI Roundtables and who, therefore, had occasion to speak were not critical of women’s studies at all. They were, they said, engaged in women’s studies; or they were looking forward to being so engaged. If one or two individuals were openly critical in sessions, that criticism had to do with feeling that the organizers of WSI had not made sufficient efforts to include people in their region formally on the program. Thus, it is possible to answer the question about usefulness by noting that several hundred participants from fifty-five countries in all regions of the world considered themselves involved in women’s studies. We were not “bringing” women’s studies to them. They were already at work in their own particular ways on their own vital agendas. We were being useful, it was clear from the enthusiasm of each session, by holding the sessions and thus providing the opportunity for discussions to move forward, for information to be shared.

What is it that women’s studies practitioners do in these fifty-five countries? And of what use would an international network be to their work? Mainly, they do research on women, and mainly also, they are aware of women’s real needs and would like to be using this research in some practical way. Indeed, they consider their research a significant manner of relating to their national movements for women’s equity. Perhaps AAWORD* researcher Filomena Steady of Sierra Leone expressed this view most succinctly when she observed that “research is part of the process of liberation.”

Outside of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, India, and several places in Europe, women’s studies means studies or research about women more than it means teaching about women. Indeed, the idea that women’s studies might be of importance to public policy, not simply to educational policy, is an idea that emanated mainly from African and Asian participants in the UNESCO conference on women’s studies held in Paris. Seen in this light, women’s studies is not simply the educational arm of the women’s movement, as we have been accustomed to viewing it in the United States. It is not only a major strategy for changing the male-centered educational curriculum from preschool through graduate school. Women’s studies is also a producer of knowledge and strategies for affecting public policy regarding all women in all phases of their lives, including education.

Thus, Marie Angélique Savane, at an AAWORD session, challenged the notion that “research is a luxury that Africans cannot afford.” She and other AAWORD researchers were speaking at a special session in Copenhagen, organized to draw together as many African policymakers attending the Mid-Decade Conference as possible so that they might hear about research on women as an essential need, rather than a frill or luxury. Similarly, the Latin Americans present were articulate about the definition of women’s studies. Eight Latin American women met as a group with Gloria Bonder who spoke for them at the large session on the question of a “network.” She said, “Right now we don’t have women’s studies; what we have is

*Association of African Women for Research and Development
Only in Mexico can one find women's studies in a university setting, and only in Copenhagen did Latin American researchers meet to talk about research on women. Unlike the Africans and the Latin Americans, while most Asian women's studies practitioners began with research aimed at affecting public policy on women, many of them have now begun to attempt reform of the collegiate curriculum; and some few, the reform of elementary education and texts as well. Asian practitioners also seemed to have the makings of a regional network in place.

I can conclude, therefore, that the Copenhagen sessions were of use to all participants, who gained a view of women's studies practitioners in various parts of the world. Even if no Network were to follow, several hundred people who had not met before had the opportunity to do so—and several dozen to form the kind of unique relationships that two-week conferences allow. Moreover, the program introduced the four major strands of women's studies to this varied group of participants, and to a wider audience. Thus, we now have, for future conferences, the beginnings of an agenda.

But what of the Network? Am I convinced that this is the time and that The Feminist Press, with the help of Vina Mazumdar and a group of international consultants, should do the work? Though there are practical limitations on what a Network can accomplish from a single center and with limited resources, the experience of Copenhagen pushed the process forward rather dramatically. I am convinced both by the enthusiasm with which the idea was greeted and by the support that it has had from various parts of the world that the Network would be useful.

Since Copenhagen, I have heard from participants who are hopeful that plans for the Network are proceeding. Some of them know about the international women's studies conference planned for mid-1982 by the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. Several other participants have drafted a proposal to hold a European women's studies conference during the summer of 1981. My sense is that the motion thus begun ought to be encouraged, and that, though it may stretch certain U.S. resources, these are, in 1980, sufficiently developed to be so challenged. Ultimately, of course, national resources in women's studies will need the challenge of international visions.

In the past months, I have worked, along with members of The Feminist Press staff, to prepare the first International Women's Studies Registry; to submit to UNESCO a proposal for the preparation and publication of a volume based on the Copenhagen Women's Studies Seminars and Roundtables; to submit a proposal to The Ford Foundation for support of the Network; and to discuss, in person and through correspondence, how to make the Women's Studies International Network proposed in Copenhagen functional. I will report on further developments in later issues of the Women's Studies Quarterly.

THE FEMINIST PRESS CELEBRATES ITS TENTH BIRTHDAY!

On November 18, 1980, at historic Town Hall, New York City, The Feminist Press held a gala birthday party to celebrate its tenth birthday. The program included Viney Burrows reading from Brown Girl, Brownstones; Geraldine Fitzgerald reading from Life in the Iron Mills; Jean Marsh reading from The Convert; Viveca Lindfors reading from Kathe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist; Mary Alice reading from I Love Myself When I am Laughing (the Zora Neale Hurston Reader); and Colleen Dewhurst reading from Daughter of Earth. Music was provided by Elly Stone and by the Harp Band. Afterwards, guests were treated to a champagne and cake reception.

Photographs from the birthday party reception: At left, top, Elly Stone (left) conversing with Mary Alice (right). Middle, left to right, Midge Mackenzie, director of the event; Onita Hicks, sponsor; Florence Howe; Judy Lerner and Irving Lerner, sponsors. Bottom, Feminist Press board members Amy Swerdlov (left) and Jane Williamson (right) with Mary Alice (center). Photo at right shows Elisabeth Janeway, sponsor, and Florence Howe cutting the birthday cake. Sponsors not shown here were: Mary Anne Ferguson, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Ann McGovern, Ellen Messer-Davidow, and Vera Rubin. Photographs by Carter Brandon.