

A man with glasses, wearing a dark jacket, is shown in profile, smiling and holding a bouquet of white flowers. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting. The entire image has a light purple overlay.

# Coming a Long Way Together: Isis and Marilee Karl

by Leti Boniol and Annie Calma Santoalla

Isis International turns 25 this October. From the homes of three women who got together in Rome, Italy in 1974 to hatch the idea of a women's information-documentation centre, an organisation by and for women rose to help empower women the world over.

One of them, Marilee Karl, recalls that bright October day in 1974 when Jane Cottingham first broached the idea of setting up such a documentation centre.

"I was at a period in my life where I was eager to jump at the idea," Marilee reminisces. "My path in life had led me to involvement in several movements for social justice and change." She had first worked with indigenous North Americans displaced by a dam that had flooded their lands. She had joined marches, sit-ins, and other forms of nonviolent resistance of the civil-rights movement. She had also joined a union in the factory where she worked the night shift to pay her way through college. She organised rent strikes in the slums of New York City.

Marilee's activism transcended borders. She participated in the student revolts that swept Europe in the late 1960s, and was among those who occupied the University of Amsterdam. "After all of us were forcibly ejected by the police, the Dutch authorities asked me to leave the

country. I ended up in Italy working with the International Documentation and Communication Centre (IDOC), an international documentation centre oriented to progressive third-world people's movements."

#### COFFEE-MAKING QUESTIONS

In all these, Marilee noticed, "it was the women who always made the coffee and ran the labourious and messy work of mimeographing copies." It was mostly the men who gave the speeches.

"I started to question if women were in fact by nature more capable of preparing coffee and carrying out the supportive tasks while men took the leadership role. The reaction of the men in the movement and also of most women was disdain: how could I bring up such petty questions in the face of the important political work to be done?"

This led Marilee to larger questions about women's subordination. She had read Betty Friedan's *Feminist Mystique*, but that was about middle-class women.

*In the early 1970s, feminists were clearly the new heretics, not only for those in power in society, but for the men in leftist and progressive movements of the time as well.*

But Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* really excited her because here were ideas that articulated and spoke to her concerns.

By then, a "new wave of feminism was beginning to rise in North America, Europe, Latin America, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the world, albeit in a quieter or less publicised form."

She became active in the feminist movement in Italy in the early 1970s. She still vividly recalls "the first demonstration of about 100 women which so frightened the male-dominated society that about 300 policemen in full riot gear were called out to disperse us. I escaped their truncheons by climbing a statue of Giordano Bruno who had been burned on the same spot for heresy some 370 years previously. Feminists were clearly the new heretics, not only for those in power in society, but for the men in leftist and progressive movements of the time as well."

What disturbed Marilee, however, was that "feminism started to get press coverage in Europe and North America (usually distorted), and feminists in the North were beginning to bring out their own publications (invariably with little money)."

However, there were virtually no channels of information for women in the South who were organising to change women's lives. Many women in the South rejected the appellation of "feminist," both because of the distorted media picture and because Northern feminists were beginning by dealing with their own problems—which seemed distant from the most pressing problems facing women in the South.

Some of them (from both South and

North) who had "developed an internationalist perspective" through their work and had had the opportunity to share with women in other parts of the world, sensed that "the underlying issues of patriarchy and subordination linked women across the globe." Issues of violence, reproductive rights, work, affected women all in different ways, she thought.

To make a long story short, Marilee, Jane and another woman, Judy Siddens, quickly latched on to the idea that their centre would include developing a means of communication that could link women and be a means for them to share their ideas and experiences internationally, without the distortion of the male-dominated transnational-controlled press.

#### **STIRRING THE WOMEN'S BREW**

Marilee remembers very well those first discussions. "In our kitchens, as we stirred our pots of soup and stews, Jane, Judy and I brewed our ideas. Other women dropped by to add ingredients. Some sent us spices from far away. A little salt here, a new spice there all simmered away so that in a few weeks time we were ready to share our recipe with the world."

Among the "ingredients" that went into the concept were:

- ◆ An organisation of, by and for women
- ◆ An activist orientation
- ◆ Feminist in the broad sense, encompassing all struggles to empower women
- ◆ Recognising the common elements and the diversity of women's oppression as intertwined with class, race, and economic, political and cultural situations
- ◆ A communication channel for



Jane Cottingham, one of the founders and brains behind the formation of Isis-WICCE.

women, alternative to the mainstream media

- ◆ An alternative documentation and information centre focused on materials produced by women's groups around the world
- ◆ Promoting especially South-South and South-North communication and dialogue

Marilee, Jane and Judy took this recipe to the First International Feminist Conference in Frankfurt, Germany in November 1974. Women applauded, she recalled, but when they asked who would join them to make it happen, they were told: "You do it, we are too busy with our local struggles."

The "elated and somewhat scared" Jane, Judy and Marilee returned to Geneva where Jane and Judy were living. Marilee particularly remembers clearly the evening over dinner where they talked it over and decided to go ahead. They decided to call the new organisation Isis, after the Egyptian goddess of creativity and wisdom, "a manifestation of the mother goddesses worshipped in so many other cultures of the ancient world."

It was a foggy night: "Maybe that's why we could not see clearly ahead that Isis would be celebrating 25 years of existence by the turn of the century, and so we did not mark the exact date of birth on our calendars!"

The three "founders" began working on building Isis "after work hours, in our homes, me in Rome, Jane and Judy in Geneva with groups of other women who were also excited enough to give whatever free time they had to the effort."



#### **BREAKING A MYTH**

Marilee corrects the impression that has somehow taken hold in recent years: that Isis was a western feminist organisation until its offices were transferred to the South. "This was never true," she asserts. "Yes, those of us doing the physical labour in the first few years were mainly (but not all) from the North, but the input, ideas and support came from women from all over the world. And all of us, from North and South, had an internationalist perspective."

Women from the South were integral and active in Isis right from the start. "Many of them were in exile from countries of Africa and Latin America. Some were studying in Europe. Others were working with development organisations. All had links with women in their home countries, women in liberation



Valsa Verghese,  
former staff and  
current board  
member of Isis-  
WICCE

struggles, women organising at the grassroots. Some of their names, like Brigalia Bam, Nita Barrow, Kamla Bhasin, Roxanna Carrillo, Anita Anand, Rhoda Reddock, Magaly Pineda, Virginia Vargas, Kumari Jayawardena, Danda Prado, have become well-known in the women's movement.

"From this first small group, an informal network grew up: more and more women sent in stories and resource materials and wrote about how women were organising. We added their names to our growing list, the materials to the piles of paper on the floor in one corner of the living room." The heart of a resource centre began to grow.

Personal computers were still some 10 years in the future. But Marilee, Jane and Judy already envisioned the day when it would come. Determined that women would be able to take hold of that technology, they organised the materials into a manual computer system using punch cards. The data base was ready to be transferred to a computer in the future. In Rome and Geneva, women gathered in their homes after a hard day's work to read and share the materials and to labour with the manual input of the data.

"Sleep? No way! It was far too exciting to find each other and other women around the world as part of an emerging global women's movement," Marilee says.

#### **OBSTACLES IN THE PATH**

It was this excitement that enabled the three women to forge ahead in spite of the obstacles in their path. First, they had no money. Second, none of them had ever raised money before. Third, they had no idea how to write a project proposal and no one showed them how. But with a little detective work, they managed to put one together. Judy set out for the U.S. to seek funds. It never occurred to them that she might not succeed.

Meantime, the 1975 International Women's Year Conference and NGO meeting in Mexico came and went. Unlike the Beijing Conference 20 years later, few in the emerging women's movement were able to access information on how to participate and even fewer were able to attend. This made Isis aim to build links between the new women's movement and the older, traditional women's

international NGOs. “We could not go to Mexico, but our networking continued to grow.”

In spite of the energy generated by working together, the three could not continue to work without money indefinitely. Judy tried for a year to raise funds. Just about no one wanted to give money to an unknown group of women who had not proven themselves.

“Only some groups of church women in the United States had enough faith that we could succeed with a little seed money. But the US\$2,500 we raised was not enough to open a resource centre or pay salaries. Judy gave up in discouragement, leaving Jane and me to decide what to do.”

It was March 1976. “The fate of *Isis* hung by a thread—or rather a telephone line. Jane and I talked it over on the phone, we conferred with the other

women. Finally we decided to use the money to publish the first (and for all we knew, the last) issue of the *Isis Bulletin*—the predecessor of *Women in Action*,” Marilee said.

#### AN AUSPICIOUS TIME

The publication could not have come at a better time.

A historic event in the new wave of the feminist movement was just taking place: the first International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, held in Brussels in March 1976. What better opportunity than to communicate this event to other women around the world!

The idea for the Tribunal had been born at the International Feminist Conference in Frankfurt and gathered over 2,000 women from 40 countries. It was financed not by grants but by cash and in-kind contributions. And it tackled



Ximena Charnes,  
current Executive  
Director of Isis-Santiago

the very same issues that the women's movement is working on today: violence against women, forced motherhood, compulsory heterosexuality, crimes within the patriarchal family, economic crimes, dual oppression of Third World women and migrant women; sexual objectification of women.

French, Spanish and Italian in 3,000 copies. To accomplish this feat, a dozen women occupied Marilee's tiny flat day and night for two weeks: the editorial team typing at the table, the layout team cutting and pasting on the living-room floor, the translation teams on the bed...And then running back and forth

to the printer, folding, stapling, addressing and sticking on stamps. At the same time another group was indexing the material and processing in the manual computer system. Into the bulletin went some of the 1,500 documents Marilee's group had processed by that time.

"We entrusted it to the postal systems of the world and held our breath. And then it happened: women from all over started responding, sending in their publications, handouts, leaflets, posters; and asking for

resource materials," Marilee relates.

Once Isis actually produced something, some funds came in to allow continued publishing. These were not enough for salaries or overhead, but at least it paid for the printer and the postage.

And so the *Isis International Bulletins* began to appear regularly. The second issue examined the image of women in the media. The third reported on women in liberation struggles, battered women, feminism and socialism. The



Marilee Karl and Ximena Charnes

"But don't think that we haven't made progress over these years. In 1976, only a few brave women were speaking out publicly. Today there are thousands upon thousands of us organised and working at all levels of society, thanks at least in part to these courageous women pioneers," says Marilee.

Isis' first publication contained a selection of testimonies and reports from the Tribunal. It came out in record time, at the end of March 1976, produced by a group of women in Rome in English,

1978 bulletin looked at reproductive rights and alternative medicine, women in Southern Africa, and women and work.

Long before women and food security issues were seriously addressed by either the United Nations or NGOs, Isis published a bulletin on women, land and food production. Then followed the issues focusing on rape and sex tourism, and migrant women. In the early 1980s, Isis bulletins covered issues on women and the media, militarisation, peace, sexuality and motherhood, women in liberation struggles, women and new technology. Reports were also published on the International Women and Health meetings and the first Latin American and Caribbean Feminist meeting in 1982.

Isis coordinated the International Feminist Network which had been established at the Brussels Tribunal. Representatives in different countries sent in appeals for solidarity which Isis then transmitted to its networks for action. Isis continued this activity until well into the 1980s when many new groups began carrying out similar efforts in different fields of women's rights.

#### OTHER ISSUES AND PUBLICATIONS

Isis also tackled major issues and produced resource books. These included: *Bottle Babies*, which documented the baby-food issue (later the subject of a worldwide campaign). Isis was able to bring this out with to the help of Nita Barrow who was then with the Christian Medical Commission in Geneva.

Together with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Isis produced the *International Women's Health Guide* which contained an analysis and resource

listing of women's health issues, activities, and groups around the world. This was a first in the women's movement and it appeared in 1980 just as the international women's health movement was bursting into worldwide bloom.

When the cry went up in development agencies in the mid-1970s to "Integrate Women in Development," Isis challenged the current models of development. "We did not want to be integrated into a development model that oppresses women and benefits only a small minority of people. We demanded a new empowering model of development," says Marilee. The Isis analysis was presented in 1983's *Women and Development: a Resource Guide for Organisation and Action*, along with resource listings and examples of women organising around the world.

By that time, the global women's movement had grown enormously in strength and size around the world and Isis had grown with it. It had two small offices in Geneva and Rome and a small international staff. In 1979, several Chilean women in exile in Rome joined Isis to coordinate its contacts in Latin America and the Spanish edition of the *Isis Bulletin*.

#### A TIME OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Isis' first ten years were also filled with friendships, love, and children in the lives of the Isis women, Marilee included. It was during these years that she married Charles

Marilee Karl and daughter Alice in the office.







(from left to right:) Gabriela Charnes, resource centre; Christine Georgeff (seated), human resource data base; Joni Rau, computerisation; Marilee Karl, coordinator; Anita Anand, associate; Gabriela Fabiani, administration.

Foubert whom she had met at IDOC while working together in the Philippine solidarity movement. They shared the same ideals and he was a great source of strength for Marilee to go on with her work in Isis when things got tough. Rare for men in the 1970s, he never considered that it was not a man's job to share equally in the responsibility of housework, cooking and childcare when the couple adopted Alice as a newborn in Chile in 1983. Charles died in Sierra Leone in 1987 working with small farmers. It was a devastating loss for mother and daughter.

Marilee stresses that not everything was easy in those early years, "not in our personal lives and not in Isis." There was never enough money or enough people to do all the work. Like any work, much of it was drudgery. And as in any organisation, there were disagreements

about directions to take and about how to get there.

At first, the two Isis coordinating offices in Rome and Geneva functioned as a single collective sharing all responsibilities and tasks, making decisions by consensus. Like much of the women's movement of that time, Isis rejected male hierarchical structures, but had not yet learned about the "tyranny of

structurelessness". The feminist movement had not yet developed alternative models of organisational structure (and the search for such structures still seems to be going on today).

The collective structure worked well as long as the organisation and the women's movement remained small and all the staff were fired by a common vision and commitment. As the work expanded in the 1980s, a structural crisis developed in the organisation. The collective no longer functioned efficiently nor effectively. It was not possible for everyone to be involved in every decision. Not everyone had the skill or the desire to take a turn at all the tasks. Consensus was more difficult to reach and dissenting views sometimes led to paralysis. There was a need for greater clarity in questions of accountability and responsibility.

## THE CRISIS YEARS

The crisis came to a head in the early 1980s. Isis had co-sponsored a site at the NGO Forum parallel to the 1980 UN Conference in Copenhagen. This was one of the few places where feminists from around the world could gather to exchange ideas and strategise. Relates Marilee: “There was a lot of follow-up. We were finishing up production of the Women and Development Guide. We organised the Third International Women and Health Meeting in Geneva and we launched an ambitious new activity: an exchange programme enabling women from different groups to spend some weeks working with other groups.”

After the first exchange programme, Isis staff undertook a major self-evaluation of both their activities and way of working. Everyone agreed that structural changes were needed that would ensure a clear division of tasks and clarity of accountability and responsibility. In terms of activities, there was much debate. The exchange programme was satisfying in that it produced immediate results. Moreover, it was more attractive to funders than Isis’ other networking activities, whose effects were harder to see.

The crisis was resolved with Isis deciding to separate its Rome and Geneva offices, each becoming a separate and independent organisation. The Geneva office decided to take on the exchange programme and the Rome office, to continue the regular publications, the resource centre and information sharing. “No one wanted to give up the name Isis, so we in Rome changed our name to Isis International,

while the Geneva office became Isis WICCE (Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange).”

## A CHANGING SITUATION

Several events happened in quick succession to Isis in Rome which would have a strong bearing on the organisation’s history.

One was the changing political situation in Chile. The Pinochet military regime began to allow exiles to return. When two of the Chilean women working in Rome were able to return in early 1984, Isis decided to transfer the work of networking with the Latin American and Caribbean women’s movement to



Joni Rau setting up our first computer system.

Chile. The Santiago office immediately became a key reference point in the region. That same year, it was asked to be the coordinating point for the newly formed Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Health Network. Here it remained until 1991 when it set up its

own offices and a separate organisational structure.

Also, better international communications and a stronger women's movement worldwide made it possible for Isis to change its way of putting together and producing its publications. The Isis bulletin was renamed *Women in Action*. Isis also began preparing books jointly with women's groups in the South.

The age of new technology also burst upon Isis and found it prepared! It shared office space with IDOC, which pioneered the use of both manual and new technology for small activist NGO documentation and resource centres, especially in the South, and that was a big help. A big plus was the major role played by Marilee's husband, Charles Foubert. The fact that Isis had put much of its information into a manual computer system also meant that it was already prepared for entry into a computerised system.

"Luck was with us. We were able to get a cheap, second-hand early-model portable computer. And then one of those inexplicable coincidences happened: As we were all standing around the machine in some awe, a woman appeared at the door. She had recently left her job as a computer programmer and was in Rome for a few months and wanted to know if there was anything she could do as a volunteer!" relates Marilee.

One happy coincidence followed another. Just after Isis had entered its human resource data base into the computer, a feminist working with the Norwegian funding agency NORAD came to visit. She sat down at the computer and did a search, and when it

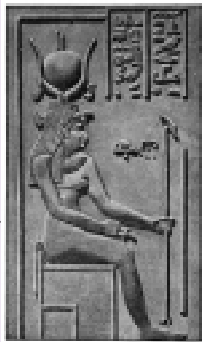
brought up the name of a nutritionist working in India whom she'd been trying to track down for some time, she was so impressed that she helped Isis to get a grant to computerise its office.

From the first, Isis envisioned its use of new technology as a way to democratise information flows. The women of Isis were determined to share its knowledge and experience. Other NGOs were beginning to organise networks on new technology. Isis joined them and lobbied to ensure that women would have access to these networks and the knowledge and skills they were sharing. Isis was also keenly aware of the exploitation of women in the electronics industries and in tedious input work.

Audiovisual technology was also becoming accessible. Isis produced a major guide, *Powerful Images*, sharing the experiences of women's groups in video and slide productions, contains a guide to these productions. Among others, it documents how Filipino migrant women domestic workers in Rome made a slide show, where they analyse their reasons for migrating as well as their need to organise themselves abroad.

At the 1985 NGO Forum at the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, together with some 30 other women's groups, Isis organised workshops focusing on the impact of multinational corporations and the debt crisis on women; an alternative development approach; and methods of cooperation for development. In these workshops hundreds of women participated and strategised on actions from the grassroots level to policymaking.

After Nairobi, it was hard to keep up with the fast growth of the women's





movement worldwide. The question arose if Isis was still needed in a women's movement that now had many specific-issue networks: health, violence against women, development, debt, human rights, sex trafficking, baby foods, media, law. A survey of readers of *Women in Action* was conducted. The answer was overwhelmingly yes. Isis had been instrumental in sowing seeds and helping many individuals and small groups to break out of their isolation and join in the wider struggle. And there was still a need to share information across specific issues, to put women in touch with each other. However, with its limited financial and human resources, Isis needed to change its way of working.

When Isis International decided to open an office in Santiago, Chile in 1984, a decision to work towards transferring the rest of its activities to another region of the South was made. In doing so, Isis International wanted first of all to reverse the common situation of being an international organisation with headquarters in the North, thereby perpetuating the situation in which groups and organisations in the South must go to the North

in order to communicate with each other and to obtain information which originally came from the South in the first place. Another reason was practical: the rising cost of operating from Rome and the difficulty of getting funds for a Northern-based organisation.

It took seven years, an extensive feasibility study and planning before this came about, with the transfer of Isis International from Rome to Manila, Philippines in 1991. For Marilee, it was a dream come true. For her, the move would open many new possibilities for Isis to be a part of the women's struggle in a new era of growth and change.

Like any move, it was not easy. The logistics in themselves were daunting: finding a new building, installing a new computer system, reincorporating under new legislation, hiring a new staff, packing and unpacking the collection of resource materials. The new staff in the Philippines took this on and overcame these and many other hurdles. Isis also had to go through a process of reenvisioning and strategic planning.

At the personal level, Marilee was faced with a major decision about her

(from left to right)  
Wai Fong Chan,  
publications;  
Gabriela Charnes,  
resource centre;  
Debbie Carlos-  
Valencia,  
audiovisuals;  
Ximena Charnes,  
Latin America.

life. When the Rome and Santiago offices took the decision to move the Rome office to Manila (the two offices were still operating as one organisation at that time), “the consensus was that I should also move in order to ensure a transition between the old and the new. I was enthusiastic about this: I had fallen in love with the Philippines and I had wonderful memories of the times I had spent visiting there with Charles until his death in 1987,” she remembers.

But for Marilee there were other considerations. Was it not time for others to take over the key role she had played in Isis since the beginning? What about Alice? She had suffered the loss of her father who had been so close to her. She was still only eight years old. Could Marilee uproot her and take her away from her friends now? What about Marilee’s own future? She had worked so long in Isis, at first for no pay at all, and later for a bare subsistence, she was not able to save for retirement or provide any security for Alice if anything should happen to her. Could she continue to work for a low salary that did not permit savings?

In the end, a compromise was reached: Marilee would continue to work as one of a team of three coordinators of the Manila office during the initial transition phase, living in Rome but visiting Manila several times a year. This was not an easy decision for her. “I must say that during the transition period I waffled back and forth about whether I should move to Manila or not,” Marilee admits.

The move to Manila brought another

structural change: Isis Intercational-Santiago and Isis International-Manila became fully autonomous of each other, but continued to cooperate whenever and wherever possible. And during this period, Isis-WICCE (which had continued in Geneva) decided to move to Africa. Isis-Manila was on the advisory committee for the move and helped conduct the feasibility study which led to Isis-WICCE’s transfer to Kampala, Uganda.

At the end of the first three years in Manila, Isis undertook an internal evaluation in 1994 and made some basic organisational changes. The terms of the three coordinators were up and it was decided to establish a different structure that would strengthen the foundation that had been laid in the first three years. Girlie Villariba became the new director of Isis-Manila. Marilee had known her in the 1970s when they were both active in the Philippine struggle against the Marcos dictatorship, and Girlie had a long history of working together with Isis. Marilee, for her part, was made honorary president of Isis International-Manila.

“I have continued to visit Isis-Manila over the past five years and am thrilled to pieces to see what wonderful work Isis has been doing and is continuing to do, how it has flourished and grown and adapted itself to changing times while still remaining true to the original mission of empowering women through information and communication. And on top of all this, Isis has managed to build its own house in Manila!” Marilee exults. ♪

