

Moving Around with our Feet Firmly on the Ground

by Ana Maria Portugal

Up to 1983, the work of Isis developed simultaneously in two offices, one in Geneva and the other in Rome. A group of Latin American women, mostly Chilean exiles in Italy, was in charge of Isis' Spanish programmes. From 1974 to 1983, the main goal of Isis was to promote the establishment of women's associations, and also to exchange information and experiences amongst women's groups in different countries and regions of the world.

At the beginning of the eighties, in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, there were many developments in the growth of social movements and nongovernmental feminist organisations that were being created. The demand for contacts and the establishment of information networks in Spanish increased so much that we decided to create a separate programme for the Latin American and Caribbean women in their own territory.

This resolution meant a transformation in three sister organisations: Isis International in Rome, Italy, Santiago, Chile and Isis-WICCE (Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange Programme) in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1990, in an attempt to strengthen the Asian network and in order to better respond to the area's needs, Isis International transferred all its activities undertaken in Rome to Manila, Philippines. Later, Isis-WICCE moved to Uganda to continue its exchange programme.



CONTINUITY

The opening of Isis International's Latin American and Caribbean programme meant the continuity of the work initiated in Rome in 1974, when Isis was founded. This meant the collection and processing of information, and the creation of liaisons and contacts with women's groups. During the following years, programmes like Publications and Communications, Violence Against Women, and Women and Health were created.

Isis' most important undertaking, implemented according to the needs and interests of national groups, and women's networks in the region, was the Center for Documentation and Information. As such, Isis participates in the International Network of Documentation

Centers for Women's Health in Brazil, Malaysia, Mexico and the United States.

Also in 1974, Isis received the commission to become the seat of information and communications of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Network against Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence. Since 1997, Isis also co-ordinates with the South American Task Force of Communicators in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.

Soledad Weinstein, coordinator of the Center for Documentation and Information, underlines its basic functions: "It serves as a repository archive of the collective memory of women's work and activities," she says, while offering "and sometimes stimulating, the generation and dissemination of adequate information for the needs of the users." The Center's documentation work is the pivot for the continuity of the rest of the programmes. A great variety of printed information goes to specific resources through its reception, study and classification to service students, researchers, women's groups, social organisations, legislators, government and nongovernment organisations.

In 1996, the Center began its computerisation programme to facilitate the storage of information and to respond efficiently to requests for information, using the CDS-ISIS system. The system facilitated the creation of a variety of specific database programmes (bibliographic, organisations, periodic publications, etc.) that disseminate information through a specific line of publications. However, we still needed to have a "descriptor," a word or phrase to identify the information or conceptual structure by themes and categories for use in the management of the database. The team in the Center solved the problem through an instrument that helped to

establish common criteria regarding the storage of information, at the same time giving relevance to those most commonly used terms that better express the reality of women.

The List of Descriptors appeared, in its first version, in *The Woman's Theme* issue of 1987. The list is subject to constant revisions and updates, changes, modifications and additions by the cross-disciplinary team that analyses, catalogues and processes documents received. The version published in 1996 is the sixth. With the arrival of new technologies the Center now offers its services through a web page and E-mail.

Today the Center for Documentation and Information has a wide collection of materials coming from all over the world. This collection includes magazines, bulletins, books, yearly statistics, essays, articles, directories and so many others.

CHANGES

The opening of the Latin American and Caribbean programme led to several changes in the publications of Isis. The editorial beginnings of Isis were rather modest, at par with the incipient women's movement in the world. At the start of the nineties, Isis began a modernisation process that involved updating and professional improvement of its editorial work. We look forward to a kind of specialised journalism that can go beyond subjects 'concerning women,' one that can incorporate gender in all themes, particularly those of major importance in the universal space of international communication.

So, the following changes took place: the bulletin *Women in Action*, first published by the Santiago (Chile) team in 1984, turned into a magazine in 1991. The team in Rome published the English edition of *Mujeres en Acción*. The *Women's International Bulletin* (*Buletín Internacional de las Mujeres*, Rome, 1976-1983) took the format of a book with the title *Women's Editions* in 1985.

The publications' style is to take the subject from the gender point of view, adhering strictly



to the principles of journalism: citing sources, testimonies, statistics, opinions, history, and the social and political context of the theme. It is a style that aims to throw light on reality with consistency and professionalism, in support of the women's agenda, on the solid basis of documented information.

This approach to information work marks an important change that began in 1974, when it became a priority to expose ignored realities and to diffuse these to the general public. During the 1990s it became very important to interlink all facts to bring about a change.

The best example of this is *Women in Action* (1991-1995) that became a true magazine with international press headlines from a gender perspective. This required constant information inputs and creative ways of delivering this information to women, from their own point of view. Unfortunately, the proposal to produce a specialised publication that could be both rigorous and attractive had to stop due to lack of funds.

Another publication that was part of the editorial change was *Journal*, published by the Health Network of Latin American and Caribbean Women. In 1984, Isis Internacional de Chile undertook the co-ordination of this network with other health groups at inter-continental level to disseminate information and initiate health campaigns. This was the purpose of an English-language bulletin that appeared in 1986. Its format changed in 1990, with English and Spanish editions (after the team integrated an Editorial Board composed of journalists), but publication ceased in 1990 when the Health Network became autonomous again.

The *Bulletin of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Network against Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence* has followed the same line of production and journalistic work since 1993.

In 1996, after an evaluation of its publication work, Isis Internacional decided to widen its scope as a channel of information and communication. The objective was to reach out beyond women's groups as the result of the impact produced on diverse sectors of society (religious, political, academic, and others) by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. With this idea in mind, a new line of publications like the dossiers *Perspectives* and *Health Agenda* began. These dossiers follow up on the proposals contained in the Action Programmes of

conferences like the one in Beijing. Also, these publications provide collated and systematised information on points that are on the agenda of the women's movement.

FROM MAGAZINE TO COLLECTION OF BOOKS

Issues of *Women*, where the Second Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting records appear, is part of a semi-annual series that forms a collection of books. A particular subject is discussed in the two books that are published each year. These provide coherent texts contributing to reflection and debate on topics that are of interest to the women's movement. *Women* has been following the development of feminist thinking in the continent since 1984.

The presentation and publishing of each book has become more professional in the last few years due to the excellent team that oversees all the technical aspects of the publication.

AN OPEN SPACE

Isis Internacional-Santiago, remains faithful to the concept set by its founders 25 years ago. Isis is an open plural space that acts as a channel for women's information and documentation at regional and international levels. In 1994, on Isis' 20th anniversary, Ximena Charnes, one of the two co-ordinators in the Santiago office, described her experience on the job in Rome as follows:

“Isis has been a space for many women of diverse origins, nationalities and experiences, where we have been able to work and contribute to the women's movement. [It is] a space where we have learned to respect the varied opinions within our organisation and within the movement in general. [Here, we feel] that all women share a point of view, an information, a new sensibility, and that we all are enriching our selves in the process.” ↻

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