

Jane Cottingham, now better known within the women's health activist networks globally, was one of the three women who founded Isis International, a pioneer organisation in international women's information and communication work. Jane now works in the World Health Organization (WHO) based in Geneva, Switzerland, in the Department of Reproductive Health and Research. As part of our 25th anniversary celebrations, Isis International-Manila interviewed Jane via E-mail correspondence. This was followed up by a conversation over tea between Jane and Susanna George, when Susanna was in Geneva in September to attend a meeting. The following is culled from the E-mail interview and a piece of writing that was submitted by Jane to the Reproductive Health Matters journal. It is presented for our Women in Action readers in interview style.

Susanna George (SG): Tell us a little about your background.

Jane Cottingham (JC): I was born to a middle-class English family. My father was in insurance, my mother gave up her job when she was married to look after her husband, her house and later her babies, including my brother



Jane Cottingham:

an Isis original

by Susanna George

who is nearly four years my senior. Two aspects of this situation were key in my development: my older brother's experience for whom all paths seemed to open in contrast to me for whom the main expectation was to find a suitable husband; and my mother's situation as housewife, completely economically dependent upon my father. I decided early on that I would never be economically dependent on anyone, and that I wouldn't marry if this were what marriage meant for women.

SG: Was this what led you to become a feminist?

JC: No. Only indirectly. That awareness came later when I came across Germain Greer. I cannot remember exactly what she said that triggered it all. Only that when I read *The*

Female Eunuch in 1971, what she had to say about women's roles and men's roles was like a blinding light on the road to Damascus. My sense of inadequacy, of not fitting in, of bewilderment and rage about the little games and tricks one had to play as a secretary to please one's boss was *not just* my own personal problem, *not even* my own personal problem. It was part of a huge and intricate tissue of deception constructed by society over centuries, in which women had been duped into believing that they were less worthy, less intelligent, less capable, less rational, less fit for the exciting things in life generally. I realised then that my situation was not a freak event, but that my frustrations and difficulties in being and becoming a woman could be explained by social-feminist analysis.

SG: What led you to setting up Isis?

JC: I left England to come to Switzerland in December 1971. I was determined to look for a different kind of life to the suffocating and impossible female role models I felt locked into. I took a job with an international organisation, but more importantly, I tried to find a consciousness-raising group of the kind described by Sheila Rowbotham and Juliet Mitchell, whose early writings I devoured after Greer. There was one, but it was closed, so I started my own. It was an impossible mix of women from all over the world with very different backgrounds and different problems, and yet it was a brilliant experience. All of us who were a



Jane Cottingham (far left) with participants of the Isis-WICCE Exchange Programme in the 1980s.

part of it felt enormously grateful to each other.

After three years of inward looking and analysing ourselves, I suddenly needed urgently to do something “out there” for the rest of the world. If women’s status was so abysmal, we ought to be helping to do something to change it. I was working in a department dealing with communication and information, analysing how unequal information flows were in the world, and how news was manufactured in the North and exported to the South, like other commodities. It became clear to me and to three or four other women that I worked with that information was also entirely male dominated—this was back in the early 1970s, remember. We realised that the one vital thing that women needed to do was to make their own information: information that was relevant, meaningful and useful to us and to help disseminate that around the world. This was the beginning of Isis (International). The small group of women, including Marilee Karl and myself, started

seriously thinking about how we might make this kind of information exchange a reality.

SG: Tell us something about the start-up period of Isis.

JC: To get this project off the ground, we knew we needed money and we elaborated a project proposal and a budget for the first three years. I do not recall the exact sum, but I believe that it was something in the region of US\$100,000. One of our colleagues went off to the United States to do fund-raising, while Marilee and I worked on building up a mailing list and a database of information by, for and about women. After one year, our colleague had raised US\$3,000. It seemed impossible to launch the project with so little, but we decided to do it anyway. It happened that the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women was happening in Brussels, Belgium in March 1976. This was a truly feminist event, designed as an alternative to the United Nations International Women’s Year in 1975. Women from dozens of countries around the world came to give testimony of crimes perpetrated against them—political, economic, medical, and societal crimes. They denounced, often in brutal terms, the discrimination they had experienced, the jobs lost because of pregnancy, the forced sterilisation, the rape, the torture, the humiliation for no other reason than that they were women. It was dynamite.

We gathered all the testimonies we could get and published the first Isis International Bulletin in English, Italian and Spanish. We sent it to all the addresses that we had collected over the previous 18 months, and Isis was suddenly on the map. We existed, and people wanted to read what we had to publish. Once we existed with a newsletter, it was easier to raise money, but it took nearly a decade before we started getting serious funding. It was and still is difficult to raise money for publications and information work. Funders tend to want to see immediate “returns” for their investment, and fostering exchange of information does not always look terribly “productive.” We had the added disadvantage of being based in Switzerland and Italy, which were not countries that donors were anxious to put their money into. There were also the initial suspicions about our “real” aims, particularly amongst people who did not know yet what our politics were. Rumours even linked us to the CIA. But over

the years, with the production of more and more bulletins, people could see who we were and what we stood for.

SG: Isis has been involved in the women's health movement since the early days. Can you tell us something about how that involvement came to be?

JC: At the same time that Isis was getting off the ground, the baby food scandal was coming to a head in Switzerland where I was living. A small development group in Bern called the Third World Working Group (TWWG) translated Mike Muller's highly provocative booklet *The Baby Killer* into German, and found themselves in the middle of a libel case brought by the powerful Swiss multinational, Nestlé. The booklet described the unethical marketing activities of the company: its liberal distribution of free milk samples in maternity hospitals, advertising campaigns showing fat bouncy babies thriving on Nestlé's milk, and perks given to health personnel if they promoted the baby milk, amongst others. Such activities encouraged women to abandon breastfeeding in favour of the bottle, which in areas where money and clean water were in short supply, led to over-dilution of the milk powder, often with contaminated water. Babies fed this way soon suffered from diarrhoea, causing malnutrition and often death. Nestlé was outraged by the accusations, or by the fact that a small group of hippie-looking students should make them. The TWWG lost the case. The extraordinary media coverage of the court case, however, also ensured that they unwittingly contributed to a huge mobilisation of development groups against the unchecked activities of baby food manufacturers marketing their products in the Third World. I was caught up in the case, partly because of my connections with the World Council of Churches (WCC) which supported the campaign against indiscriminate introduction of baby milks into developing countries. A lot of the feminist analyses regarding women's roles and women's bodies did not come through in the Nestlé trial nor in the booklet *The Baby Killer*. So I sat down and wrote the *Guide to the Baby Foods Issue*, which included a centrepiece chapter on women. This guide came out at exactly the same time as the first Isis International Bulletin, and so as Isis was launched, women's health issues were firmly on the table. Later, The Boston Women's Health Collective suggested

to Marilee Karl and I that we compile a guide to the women's health movement together with them. This we did, and it appeared in time for the Mid-Decade Conference on Women in Copenhagen in Denmark in 1979.

SG: How was Isis structured in the early days?

JC: From the beginning there were two offices of Isis: one in Rome led by Marilee Karl, and one in Geneva led by me. There were fluctuating numbers of women who came to work with us in each place, mainly because in the early years the work had to be voluntary. It is extraordinary to me, thinking back, that so many women were so ready to dedicate their time to us. Gradually, as we moved into the 1980s, there came to be a steady group of about six women in each place. (Ed: In 1984, the two offices in Geneva and Rome decided to become autonomous organisations with their own programmes and their own funding strategies. The office in Geneva took the name of Isis-WICCE (Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange), and the office in Rome became Isis International.)

We tried as much as possible to work as a collective since part of the early analysis of feminism was that hierarchies lead to injustices in which women are often at the bottom of the pile. Our idea was to create a different kind of working environment in which each woman is valued for her specific qualifications and contributions, and that no one woman was "better" than another. It was a wonderful and idealistic approach, being used by many "alternative" groups in Europe at the time. But it was by no means easy. We had long, sometimes heated, meetings in which we tried to put all our differences and difficulties on the table. Mostly, I think this



A young Jane at her first International Conference in Sri Lanka

worked. Later, however, when I was in the throes of leaving Isis, it became clear to me and to all of us, I think, that although we called ourselves a “collective,” I was in fact the person “in charge,” or at least the one who had invested the most in terms of money and energies, and perhaps the one who knew most about all the aspects of the work. At least this is my perception. After I left in 1987, more hierarchy was put into place with an executive director and others with different labels.

You need a good dose of unrealism, a huge amount of naiveté and a fabulous belief in the cause—whatever it is—to launch something like Isis, and to succeed.

SG: What led to Isis-WICCE moving to the South?

JC: Isis-WICCE transferred from Geneva to Kampala, Uganda in 1994. Behind this decision was a desire to move the documentation and resource office closer to the developing world, as a transfer of technology to the South, to involve more Southern women and, not unimportantly, to obtain more funding. It became more and more difficult to sustain a project in Switzerland. I think this was good reasoning and I believe the decision to move the bulk of Isis to Third World countries was a good one. However, some of us felt that it would be important to continue some kind of resource and documentation centre in Geneva because of its importance for the international organisations based here. Others did not agree. This split caused a deep rift among the workers and close supporters of Isis at that point (1991-1992). It was at this point that I decided to distance myself completely from the developments.

SG: What is your assessment of this move overall?

JC: In my own assessment, over the 15 years that I worked with Isis (1974-1987), we very much fulfilled our objectives of fostering exchange of information among women’s groups around the world and of supporting the development of information and documentation networks and the exchange of skills. I feel strongly that an organisation does not have to

continue to exist just because it has existed, and that if its purpose has been fulfilled, then it can evolve into something else, or even nothing. I think the moving of Isis to three different countries of the developing world (Chile, Philippines, Uganda)—each a different and autonomous organisation—has been an indication of its strength and ability to evolve. For myself, I maintain closer ties with the Chilean office than the others, since my focus on health has kept me in touch with the Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Health Network, which was originally a part of Isis Internacional-Santiago. From where I am, Isis WICCE does not show up as a key women’s group, but perhaps it is because they do not focus on health which is my area. I also have hardly received anything from the Manila office in a very long while, though I would definitely welcome the opportunity to hear from you more regularly.

SG: What are you involved in currently?

JC: I now work with the World Health Organisation in the Department of Reproductive Health and Research. I am currently in the Technical Office for Women’s Perspectives and Gender Issues, which has involved me in organising a whole series of meetings where I brought together women’s health advocates and scientists as well as programme managers in reproductive health. I have also launched a number of projects related to women-controlled barrier methods of contraception, and related to the ethics of research. I am now involved in “gender mainstreaming” in the WHO as a whole, and with it trying to launch a more coherent programme with my department on reproductive rights.

SG: What are your new passions?

JC: I can’t really answer this question. Since my husband’s passing away in 1998, I have been trying to keep body and soul together for the moment. I would love to get to a point of having more time for myself, more time for meditating, and especially more time for writing. Eleven years ago, I started writing a history of Isis. I wrote about 120 pages, but never finished it partly because there was no time, and partly because the thing started taking the shape of a novel and I realised that I really wanted to write fiction and not history. So in 1998 I managed to negotiate a three-month leave to try and get

down to writing again. It took me a long time to get into it, and I was really only just beginning to get into the swing when my leave came to an end. And then my husband died, and I have not had either the inspiration or the time to return to it. But this is my wish, and I suppose that eventually I will find the time, the will and the inspiration to go on with my writing.

I believe that any social change project—of which feminism is a part—to be effective in the new millennium has to pay critical attention to economics.

SG: Do you think you've accomplished the goals that you set out to accomplish 25 years ago?

JC: I think that Isis has been a terrific success, and yes, to a certain extent, I did fulfil my goals. I blanch when I think of how intrepid and totally unrealistic we were at the beginning of Isis, and if we had any idea of how hard it was going to be, we probably wouldn't have done it. But that is probably true of all innovative projects. You need a good dose of unrealism, a huge amount of naiveté and a fabulous belief in the cause—whatever it is—to launch something like Isis, and to succeed.

In the meantime, I have aged, and the world has changed enormously. The political, economic and social realities of the 1990s moving into the next century are very different from those we faced in the early 1970s. Electronic communication has totally changed our lives for a start. There is not the same sense of urgency to get information “out there” because we're all facing an information overload, although of course the quality and source still leave much to be desired. Today the whole notion of creating an information network and service for women must be predicated on a very different reality from that of 25 years ago. I am delighted that there are others launching into specialist listserves on the Internet, CD-ROMs and other wonderful resources. Any developments in Isis have to be on top of this rapidly evolving technologies.

SG: Do you have any advice to us at Isis International-Manila as we look beyond our 25th year of work?

JC: If you believe in your purpose, I would say follow your hearts and put all you have into it. In many ways, I think it is easier for you in a country like the Philippines than it is for us now in Europe. We have made a lot of gains over the past 25 to 30 years. I see it in the way my daughter and her friends glide easily into new jobs and take so many things for granted about employment and status that we would never have dreamt of. And this, to me, is a measure of the women's movement's success. We have moved things, we have changed things, and young women are benefiting from it. And yet we have to keep fighting.

Only recently, in Switzerland, a popular vote defeated a proposed new law to safeguard paid maternity leave. And we know that the liberalisation of abortion is never something to become complacent about. At the same time, the new roles for women have put more severely to question the role of men. What is masculinity and what does it mean to be male, especially a young male in today's world of ultra consumerism, economic “liberalism” and the reign of the “bottom line?” I see many young men in this part of the world at least casting around for answers and not finding them. And not finding jobs and wondering how they can make money quickly. As though that was all that mattered.

I must say that I am somewhat cynical about the social developments at the end of this millennium. I come from a generation that was infused with an extraordinary belief that we could change the world. We questioned the values of our war-infested parents, we pursued social theories that dazzled us with their coherence and delighted us with their foundations in social justice. What we didn't grasp was the importance of the global nature of the world economy as it was developing after the War. I believe that any social change project—of which feminism is a part—to be effective in the new millennium has to pay critical attention to economics. In the area of health, health reform, health systems, services and research, the big challenge for those of us from the “old” feminist movement is to find ways to marry cost-effectiveness with ethics and human rights. For the moment, we are still a long way from that. ☺

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