THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONGRESS ON WOMEN

CONFERENCE REPORT THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONGRESS ON WOMEN Dublin, Ireland, July 6-10, 1987

It is now two years on from the Nairobi conference that closed the UN Decade for Women in 1985. Although the conclusion of that conference was that the global status of women is deteriorating rather than improving, the conference also launched what many have described as the third wave of feminism. The Nairobi conference — partial, imperfect, and beset by contradictions, as are all feminist politics —was a profound testimony to the existence of a powerful and enduring international feminist movement. Most importantly, it was an important public affirmation of the links between peace, equality, and development, and it stands as a model of a women's collective action that sent a message to the world.

Since Nairobi, the international feminist networks that emerged out of that conference have continued to grow. They have also begun to play a much more important role in feminist politics generally. This shift in contemporary feminism is a direct result of increasing awareness about the differences that divide women and the visions of the future that unite us. It is the product of a greater recognition of the links between the many struggles women are involved in all over the world. The motto of the Nairobi conference, to "think globally and act locally," represents many hard won political lessons within the feminist movement.

This past summer saw several important feminist conferences, both national and international, which enthusiastically carried forward the post-Nairobi commitment to a feminist movement in which our differences are our greatest source of wisdom and strength. In the United States, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conducted its tenth anniversary conference on the campus of Spellman College, a black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. This was the first time the NWSA had chosen a black campus for its annual conference. It was also the first time that a large part of the program was conceived, organized and attended by black women. In the words of Angela Davis, keynote speaker at the opening of the conference, "We are about to find ourselves on the crest of a third wave (of the women's movement). . . . The task that lies before us is to create a revolutionary, multi-racial women's movement which reflects the central importance of issues facing working class and poor women."

In Moscow, 2800 women from 154 countries met this summer to consider prospects for peace, equality, and development. The World Congress of Women conference was an important affirmation of the agenda set in Nairobi. The Congress was addressed by Gorbachev, a hopeful sign that at least some of the world's political leaders are beginning to appreciate the relationship between women's subordination and issues such as famine, the nuclear threat, underdevelopment, and poverty.

In Costa Rica, nearly 800 women from over 80 countries met in May for the Fifth International Women and Health meeting. Loosely affiliated through the Women's Global Network on Reproductive Rights, the women who attended the Costa Rica meeting had a chance to discuss a wide range of issues related to women's health, and to share perspectives from different countries on similar problems such as abortion, infertility, and motherhood.

The Third International Inter-disciplinary Congress of Women, held in Dublin July 6-10, brought an estimated 3000 participants from over 50 countries together to address a broad agenda of current issues within feminism and women's studies. This event, like the others, embodied many of the changes that have recently taken place within the feminist movement. An epic task of conference organization and pre-planning, this year's Congress was entitled "Women's Worlds: Visions and Revisions." The 956-page book of abstracts, itself a significant documentation of contemporary feminist thought, begins with a symposium on women in antiquity and ends with a study of domestic violence against women in the Republic of Ireland. In between are the 23 subject

categories into which the contributions of participant are divided. These contributions were organized as panels, discussions, seminars, and workshops and presented over the course of the week. In addition to "the scientific program," there were several other events running concurrently. The first Festival of Irish Women's Art and Culture, an international bookfair of feminist and women's studies publications, and the first national exhibition of work by Irish women painters at the national gallery were all part of "Women's Worlds."

Several keynote speakers were invited to address the Congress, and these sessions proved to be a highlight of the Congress. Without exception, all of the speakers presented views that were intensely personal, passionate, and often outrageously funny. All of the presentations were from feminist political activists and were both inspiring and deeply moving. Over the course of the week, the keynote presentations, due to their exceptional quality, became a very important focus for the Congress participants. Here especially, the Nairobi commitment to peace, equality, and development was affirmed as a critical focus for the Congress and for the feminist movement more generally. Both Birgit Brock-Utne and Helen Caldicott, who began and ended the keynote series, spoke about the centrality of women's struggle to the struggle for peace. Both speakers argued that the concept of peace must include an end to male domination of women. Kamla Bhasin, a Development worker, addressed the question of women's relationship to economic development in the Third World. She stressed the importance of improving women's status as a means of relieving poverty, famine and poor health. She asked what "development" meant, and emphasized that it cannot be a concept of minimum requirements but must be a means of allowing the great potential people have to create for themselves to become a reality. Author Mary Daly addressed a capacity audience in the National Concert Hall on the subject of women and language. The ways in which women are denied an empowering sense of self and preoccupied by "plastic passions" were presented in a forceful and often very humorous fashion. Finally, a panel of speakers on the subject of "Women in Ireland Today" spoke on a number of themes, including women in parliament, women in history, feminist politics, and the resurgence of the new right and religious fundamentalism.

Due in large part to the efforts of Women In Learning, a Dublin feminist collective, a priority on access for community women enabled many Irish women to participate in the Congress. As a result, there was a very strong sense of the immediate struggles faced by Irish women throughout the week. There was also a clear sense of differences between university-oriented and nonuniversity-oriented styles of presentation. At times, this created the feeling that there were two conferences occurring, one largely academic and the other more grass roots. The site of the Congress – Trinity College – contributed to this juxtaposition, as it represents educational privilege and the tradition of "higher" learning. The cost of the Congress, approximately $200.00 for registration and less for attendance at specific events, was prohibitive and prevented the attendance of many women. Some participants were offered reduced or waived registration, but there was a very limited budget for supporting women who could not afford transportation, accommodation, and other expenses. This issue was the subject of much discussion, and a commitment to improving access in future congresses was affirmed. This recurrent dilemma, inherent in any international event, will continue to demand considerable attention from the organizers of international conferences.

Both the debate about access for Irish women and the criticisms of the predominantly white and middle-class attendance reflected a failure to achieve the goals of the Nairobi conference. Although many things have changed, it is clear that many things are also still the same. The struggle against race and class privilege being reproduced within the feminist movement must include practical measures as well as good intentions.

There were a number of debates that gained momentum and attracted interest over the course of the week. These shed light on both the constitution of the Congress and the issues that are of most concern within various strands of feminism and women's studies. One such "theme" was the issue of women's relationship to power, hierarchy, and leadership. Several papers were addressed to this subject and there appears to be an increasing amount of research in this area. It is likely that this reflects, among other things, the degree of institutionalization certain changes initiated by the

feminist movement have attained. It is also probable that this concern emerged as a central theme at the Congress due to the disproportionately large number of delegates chosen by the organizing committee to represent the United States. A related concern was that of women's relationship to men, especially within feminism and women's studies. That a full-page conference report published by the *Irish Times* at the beginning of the week was headlined "Have Men Taken Over Feminism?" no doubt added fuel to the fire.

As if the first wave of feminist scholarship had broken sufficient ground to be able to stand back for a reassessment, there was a feeling at some of the presentations I attended of what I would describe as paradigm anxiety. This anxiety manifested itself most often in the form of attempts to identify "state-of-the-art" feminist expertise and peg it to particular sets of questions or debates. However, panel presentations were often widely diverse and questions of this sort were not often met with any clear answers. Some of the more interesting discussions, especially in the methodology and epistemology sessions, concerned the question of what kind of knowledge we want, and whether the idea of a paradigm were not itself misleading.

Feminist responses to the new reproductive technologies were a major subject of debate at the Congress. Nearly every session included a panel on reproductive technology, and I attended many of these presentations. Over the course of the week, a number of issues became the focus of ongoing discussion among participants. I was struck by certain recurrent similarities in the forms of these debates, which are indicative of the ways in which feminists are approaching the subject of reproductive technology. What was most interesting about these debates was the extent to which they defied many conventional divisions within feminism and women's studies.

For example, the distinction between feminist scholarship and politics —traditionally a contested boundary—had little relevance to the debates about reproductive technology. It was clear from many of the presentations that feminist researchers in this area are much more well-informed, knowledgeable, and concerned about the long-term social implications of these technologies than most of the government appointed committees set up to regulate them. Equally clear was the fact that feminists are among the only researchers in this field to prioritize a gender analysis in their assessment of these technologies—a particularly shocking fact, given that women are their direct subjects. Both an attention to the long-term social implications of reproductive, and especially genetic, engineering and an analysis of their effects for women in particular must be considered both scholarly and political questions.

Even before the Congress got underway it was clear that there were many different groups involved in the reproductive technology debate. Given the history of splits within the women's movement around issues of sexuality and reproduction, one might easily have predicted several major confrontations before the week was finished. Although there were heated exchanges at times, I found it encouraging that overall the sessions involved exchange of strongly felt concerns across many differences without disintegrating into splits. This was even true when, against the wishes of the panel organizer, an IVF doctor was appointed as a *discussant* by the conference organizers. Although no one on the panel felt this to be an appropriate intervention, it proceeded without disruption.

Overall, the success with which women from very different points of view were able to communicate effectively about the subject of the new reproductive technologies was very encouraging. Women who had used the technology, women who applied the technology, women who opposed the technology, women who were infertile, women who counseled infertile couples, women who had researched various subjects, and women who had no previous knowledge at all of the subject were all brought together. Women often spoke with great feeling about this issue and often challenged each other's understandings or assumptions.

Another historical division that did not appear as a faultline across the debates was that between Western and Third World feminists. Although the history of feminist debates concerning reproduction and sexuality has been the site of some of the most deeply divisive splits between Western and Third World feminists, the subject of reproductive technology does not elicit the same antagonism. In particular, the links between the "old" reproductive technology of population

"control" and the "new" technologies of "assisted conception," fertility control, and prenatal diagnosis are increasingly apparent. All of these technologies of "control" over reproduction inevitably involve decisions about which people are more desirable than others. Their inseparability from ideologies of racial, sexual, and class divisions is thus equally apparent in Western and Third World contexts.

As a researcher in this area myself, I do not believe the discussions of reproductive technology at the Dublin conference were unusual in their failure to divide along predictable lines. Rather, I believe it is a result of the fact that reproductive technology emerged as a major subject of debate within the women's movement only after the movement had already become more experienced in dealing with volatile differences. Many women in Dublin commented on the increasingly clear relationship between reproductive technology and the agenda of the Nairobi conference. Especially at the day-long meeting after the conference, organized by FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering), many women commented on the importance of addressing reproductive technology within many other struggles — for peace, health, the environment, and disarmament. The feminist response to reproductive technology is, like these other struggles, about the future. It is about the question of what the world is going to look like in the future, and who is going to be given the power to decide. It was because of this shared recognition that women must have a greater role in deciding what kind of future there will be that differences were not an insurmountable obstacle among participants.

For these and other reasons, the reproductive technology panels at the Dublin conference were a good example of changes in feminist politics and in feminist debates. They reflected a strong international focus and an improved ability to conduct productive dialogue across profound differences in point of view. They were evidence of the need to forefront the links between the many different struggles women are involved in to try and bring about a better future. They successfully combined feminist scholarship and feminist political activism, with presentations that were accessible and generated much discussion. None of this is surprising, given the inevitable centrality of control over reproduction to the women's movement and the obviousness of what is at stake for women in the development of reproductive technology.

The Fourth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women will be held at Hunter College in New York in 1990. It will then be the 5th anniversary of the Nairobi conference, and the feminist movement will be at least twenty years old. As international questions increasingly occupy a central location within the feminist movement, and the strategy of "thinking globally and acting locally" prevails, international feminist conferences of this sort can be expected to play an ever greater role in feminist politics.

SARAH BROOKS FRANKLIN
The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
University of Birmingham, England