Despite general acceptance of the principle, there has been little progress in achieving equality for women. In many cases there has, in fact, been regression. While a good inventory of the special problems of women in most countries does exist, what is missing is an understanding of the root causes that further research can help to provide.

The need for more research on women was emphasized at the Copenhagen United Nations World Conference on Women in 1980. The need for a conference devoted exclusively to research and teaching on women's issues was again recognized at the Nongovernmental Organizations Forum in Copenhagen. A series of meetings confirmed the worldwide interest in this field of activity. It also showed that specialists were isolated within their own institutional environments or countries, that contact between countries was extremely limited, and that communication of any kind was haphazard. This was in spite of the fact that a great deal of research of worldwide value was being done, and teaching programs that could serve as models were being established. A truly international conference — the first on this subject — was seen as the means to pursue this dialogue, gain further acceptance of the field, and establish the basis for ongoing communication among practitioners.

Between July 26 and August 4, 1982, 350 women from 71 countries met at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, for the first International Conference on Research and Teaching Related to Women. For the organizers, based at Concordia's Simone de Beauvoir Institute, the meetings marked the culmination of 20 months of effort. For the participants, they provided a unique opportunity to make contact with their colleagues, gain insights from the experience of others, and lay the foundation for future exchanges.

Making the idea a reality presented the twin challenges of initiating action, and of doing it in the area of women's affairs, where there is a perennial scarcity of resources. In addition, there were special problems related to participation, financing and programming.

SPECIAL CHALLENGES

For the conference to be truly international and to make a significant statement on the general state of the art, it was essential that specialists from as many countries as possible be contacted and that there be a good geographical balance among participants. In the absence of any roster of researchers on women's issues, it was decided to appoint liaison committees or contact persons in various parts of the world who could publicize the conference and draw up a list of potential participants on a regional basis. It was understood that individual specialists would participate in their own right, not as representatives of institutions or organizations.

Operational funding had to be obtained for the entire project. It also became clear that travel grants were needed. Without them, the desired geographical representation could not be achieved. The Canadian host university, Concordia, could only provide seed money and some administrative support. Fund raising therefore became a major preoccupation.

The Ford Foundation provided a generous grant early in the project, allowing work to start. Support gradually came from other sources, including the governments of Canada and Quebec, development agencies from Canada, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), France, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and Unesco. The IDRC provided both travel funds and technical advice through its Social Sciences and Information Sciences divisions. In the end, sufficient funds were raised to cover conference expenses and to provide approximately 70 participants with full or partial travel grants.

While highlighting common interests, the main objectives of the conference also had to reflect the interests of
specialists from various economic and social backgrounds. In the absence of any precedent, it was decided to consult as many specialists as possible before finalizing the program. Questionnaires were sent out worldwide; meetings were held with scholars from nearby universities, and every opportunity was taken to consult experts.

On the basis of these discussions, the main objectives of the conference were defined as follows: to provide an international forum for discussion and exchange on teaching, research, and associated issues relating to women; to reinforce newly created research centers and women's studies groups throughout the world; to recognize and enhance the contribution of teaching and research on women to social and economic development; and to facilitate the establishment of networks at all levels.

The final program did not attempt to include all proposed subjects, but rather sought to identify questions of interest to all, regardless of background and priorities. Because the conference was a first and the field is in its formative years, the program emphasized questions of definition and methodology. Experts needed to introduce themselves, test their assumptions, and discuss conceptual approaches. The major plenaries were devoted to conceptual approaches to research, conceptual approaches to teaching, and research and social action. In addition, one plenary addressed practical issues — resources available for research and teaching related to women, communication, information-sharing, and networking after the conference. Following that plenary, participants were invited to discuss regional follow-up activities in special workshops chaired and organized by a representative of each region.

A PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

Given its stated objectives, the conference was extremely successful. Not only did women from 71 countries attend, but the desired balance in regional representation was as good as could possibly be achieved, with 45 participants from Asia/Pacific, 49 from Africa, 31 from Middle East and 41 from Latin America/Caribbean. There was great excitement on the part of the participants just to be together, as for many it was the first opportunity to attend an international meeting.

Pending the final report, it is possible to draw a few general conclusions and highlight recurrent themes.

It is clear that priorities and, to a certain extent, methods vary greatly between researchers from different countries. In fact, researchers from developing countries warned against the myth of the universality of women's condition that has misled several Western researchers working on women's issues in development.

There is, however, a common purpose and spirit among these experts, who are moved by a desire to improve the situation of women and of society as a whole. They look to the future and shed a new light on current issues that provides a different vision of society. They are fundamentally creative, questioning accepted methods, seeking new approaches, re-examining concepts and premises. The real value of their research lies in the new questions raised and the new interpretation given to existing data.

Research on women is seen as an integral component of a three-part global phenomenon consisting of research, social action, and grass roots women's groups, each component reinforcing and in constant interaction with the others. This close linkage between action-oriented components opens up new avenues to interpretations and methods. Participatory research, for example, redefines the relationship between researcher and researched, as it involves the women themselves in the solution of a problem that they have identified through research.

There is great concern with the need to bring the findings to the attention of policymakers. Special strategies have been developed, with some success, both to transmit the information and to provide tools with which the new ideas can be received and implemented. Such a close interaction between researchers, activities, and policymakers implies a strong personal relation between the researcher and the society in which she operates. This in turn points to the need for a decentralization of activities and the development of local research capabilities.

Given the scarcity of resources and the common priorities, there is a strong need for sharing information, and the need for sharing information was also stressed. As a first step, it was suggested that a system be established to provide information on who is doing what, and where. The idrc is financing the preparation of An annotated directory of researchers and educators on women to be published by the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. It will form the basis of a continuing, updated directory service on a regional basis.

Networking at the regional level was seen as an immediate need. In fact, the regional meetings at the conference were one of the most popular aspects of the program, and almost all regions organized several supplementary meetings, making maximum use of this rare opportunity to meet with colleagues and to discuss possible follow-up.

The Asian group took top honors with a total of five meetings, by the end of which they had established an association — the Asian Women's Research and Action Network (AWRAN). The African and the Latin American groups left with plans to reinforce their respective regions since 1982. 0

The European group, which still lacks a formal network, was prompted to look for means of constituting one very shortly. There is no doubt that the Montreal conference will be seen as a landmark in the development of research and teaching on women's issues. Its participants left hoping to meet again in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya, at the United Nations Conference that will mark the end of the International Decade on Women. There they will report on what progress they have been able to make in their respective regions since 1982.

THE NETWORK

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Asia/Pacific: The Asian Women's Research and Action Network (AWRAN)
C/o PILIPINA
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