

Comments on the Origins of the Commission on Women

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I. Thanks to Don [Opitz] and Maria [Santesmases] for inviting us to reflect on the history of the Commission on Women and Gender – and greetings to all of you – hope you are having a great time together and wish I were with you in the land of Belgian chocolate!

II. My short agenda today:

--my memory of the origin story of the Commission on Women with a hint of its drama

--commentary on how the early goals has been realized and expanded over 40 years

--a suggestion that we might do more as catalyst in and beyond the IUHPS

III. Some history – a trip down memory lane

--historical context is important – time was propitious

--women's movement in the US in the late 1960s and 1970s had created momentum and primarily addressed issues in politics and economics. Professional and academic women was gathering data and found ways to infiltrate male dominated institutions through collection action with the goal of changing them. I had first collaborated with Margaret [Rossiter] when we both lived in Boston and we created a New England Area Women's group that met several times at Simmons College, where I was teaching at the time. We were both instrumental in establishing and sustaining the Women's Caucus of the History of Science Society. While the Commission on women was thus part of a pattern, its international dimension was, I think, very special. We conjured with the idea, often by phone, as we each made plans to attend the meeting in Bucharest and share a room.

Serendipity and good luck played a role alongside our activist feminism – I was the only (and at that the first) woman on the US delegation and Margaret was named an alternate – at our first meeting with the five person delegation, we proposed a Commission on Women – although quite junior, we had attended the Edinburgh meeting and realized that commissions were the mechanism by which individuals most readily got on the program - commissions also underscored the legitimacy and visibility of subfields. It was fortunate that Tom Hughes was chair of our delegation and supportive – we recognized that building alliances with such male colleagues was critical because the vast majority of all delegates were men and not particularly sympathetic.

--So, Margaret and I, still relatively junior in the field, sat in a hotel room in Bucharest and wrote a draft resolution for the Commission. Tom had been alerted to our plan, and the US delegates agreed to sponsor it – but passage would require first getting on the agenda (requiring its own complicated negotiation with an executive committee) and then getting a majority vote of the full assembly. As we began to lobby other delegations, to our perhaps naïve surprise, the delegations we presumed were the obvious allies (Britain and western Europeans) were cold to the idea (a few men were sarcastic suggesting the topic was nonsensical because science was gender neutral and, after all, who were we anyway?). On

the other hand, Eva Vamos stepped up and rallied Eastern Europe and Russia – communist countries that were proud of their statistics of women in engineering and medicine. Having spent time in Australia, I persuaded Rod Home, who chaired that delegation, to help rally several of the British Commonwealth and post-Commonwealth nations, including South Africa and India. We watched as the Assembly voted, not confident about a positive outcome until the final votes were counted – but we won!

--The women at the meeting - some of you here - also talked with their delegations, and then joined an informal gathering to shape the new Commission on Women. Margaret was elected the first president and the group began to discuss plans for another meeting with two broad goals in mind:

- 1) to create a supportive space for women historians and those who studied women's history, recognizing that junior status and geographical location constituted particular barriers
- 2) to advance the study of women and gender in science in the field more generally

IV. Most important for this historical retrospective, is just how much has happened in the intervening decades – a few observations

- 1) -- we can literally the hundreds of presentations have been made at the regular and especially at the interstitial special meetings coordinated by many of you, primarily in Europe.
- 2) --these in person meetings led to collaborations between authors and editors, yet another venue for the history of women and gender
- 3) --the history of women in science is now recognized as significant, although it remains a disappointment to me that such work is not more clearly integrated into other historical accounts
- 4) --and what I personally cherish are the personal relationships, some fleeting and some more long term, that came from our conferences. Already there has been wonderful email correspondence about how the Commission has helped frame individual careers and brought empowerment simply by existing as a place for community and advocacy

V. Finally, all of you anticipate that discussion today will be forward thinking – so I raise some relevant questions:

- 1) --what more can we do to bring scholars with common interests from truly around the world to our Commission meetings?
- 2) --how do we continue to facilitate participation and leadership among junior scholars and isolated women around the world?
- 3) --are there additional ways make meetings like this more visible through coordination with other history of science societies, museums, and other institutions?

I am well aware that women's studies programs morph (and sometimes disappear). It is critical to continuously re-envision the future Commission, while never losing sight of the fact that we are fundamental to documenting the history of women and gender in the sciences.

But my time is up - I look forward to the continuing conversation.