

# The Dream Lives On



Marilee Karl: Still at it after all these years.

Isis International began TWENTY-ONE years ago in the KITCHENS OF THREE DEDICATED and enterprising FEMINISTS. Marilee Karl, one of the THREE founders, talks about the GROUP'S EARLY YEARS.

by Marilee Karl

It was 21 years ago, in 1974, that the idea for Isis was born as part of a worldwide reawakening of the activist women's movement. The dream of Isis was to contribute to and be part of this new wave of the global women's movement by providing information and communication

channels for women and women's groups to network and link up in our struggle to empower ourselves.

At that time, the First World Conference on Women and its parallel NGO meeting were being planned for Mexico City in 1975. Unlike the Beijing NGO Forum where thousands of activist women came together from the world over, few activist women from grassroots groups in the South were able to attend the Mexico NGO Forum. Fewer still participated in the Conference which was limited to NGOs that enjoyed consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). There was little information available on how others could influence the United Nations Conference. And although the NGO meeting was open to all, women from newly formed women's groups found it difficult to obtain information on how to participate.

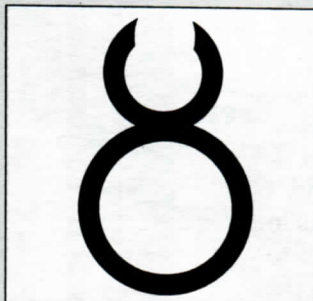
Because of this, a small group of us—Judy Siddens, Jane Cottingham and myself—dreamt of setting up an information and communication



channel to form of the women's movement. Women were developing new analyses and strategies but at that time, it was not easy to learn how other women elsewhere were thinking and organizing. The mass media largely ignored the women's movement in the South and distorted or ridiculed feminism in the North. The non-government organizations to which we belonged, although progressive, considered women and women's issues to be secondary in importance to what they considered as the "main" political, economic, social and cultural struggles.

So, after talking about the media with other women in various parts of the world, the three of us decided to create an organization whose mission would be to participate in and promote women's self-empowerment. We wanted to provide women and women's groups worldwide with spaces and opportunities through which they could communicate, share information, experiences, ideas and analysis, and to network and forge links. We named the organization after the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, whose attributes include creativity, wisdom and knowledge.

**I**sis International began very slowly and in a very small way. We worked with a group of other volunteers from our homes in Rome and Geneva during our free time on weekends and evenings. The first thing we did was contact as many women and women's



Sign of Isis.

**I**sis is a major Egyptian goddess. In Egyptian scriptures, she is the Creatress. "In the beginning there was Isis, Oldest of the Old. She is the Goddess from whom all becoming arose." Aside from being the source of life, Isis is also revered as the goddess of re-birth.

The cycle of the Nile river is the backdrop for the belief in and reverence for Isis. Every year, the Nile goes into a cycle of wet and dry. Death is associated with the dry season, when hardly any water flows in the river and the land becomes arid and plants wither and die. Then comes flood. The waters of the Nile inundate the land, making it fertile. It is said that the waters of the Nile is Isis's blood or milk that feed both mortals and gods. Osiris, husband of Isis, takes care of the Nile and all that grow from the land.

The dry period of the Nile is believed to be the death of Osiris while the floods are Isis's tears as she grieves the death of her husband. Seth, Osiris's brother, hacked Osiris to 14 parts and then scattered the pieces all over Egypt.

Isis searched the land for Osiris' remains. Helping her was her twin sister Nephthys. While Isis belonged to the light, to the new and full moon, Nephthys loved the waning and dark moon. As Isis was to the morning star, Nephthys was to the evening star. As Isis was to the living, Nephthys was to the dead.

The two goddesses searched for Osiris' body parts and found all except for his penis. Isis then took some clay and fashioned a penis for Osiris.

The combined powers of the sisters Nephthys and Isis guarantee the immortality of pharaohs who will be resurrected after their death like Osiris. Their combined powers assure humankind of the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Isis is usually represented by the sun disc lying between the horns of the Moon-cow, which is the enclosed and protected male spirit soon to be reborn.

Isis is worshipped in the entire Greco-Roman world, "from Alexandria to Arles, from the outskirts of the Sahara to the isle of Britain, from the mountains of Asturias to the mouths of the Danube." When Christianity flourished, adoration of Mary, the mother of Christ prevailed over the veneration of Isis. But even early Roman Christians called themselves Pastophori meaning "servants of Isis." Few people know that the popular image of the Madonna and Child was derived from the Egyptian image of Isis breastfeeding her son Horus the Sun under the sacred tree of Hathor. ☽



groups around the world as we could. The information that we gathered we shared with other women.

We also sat down to the practicality of developing plans and project proposals to raise money so that we could set up a resource and documentation center and an office with a full time staff. Our enthusiasm was so great that we were sure we could raise funds from donor agencies. Were we surprised! After a year of fund-raising in the United States, Judy Siddens gave up in exhaustion. She had raised less than US\$3,000 despite great efforts. The only ones that showed any interest or support for our idea were church women's organizations.

Jane and I were faced with the decision of whether to go on. We nearly gave it all up, but in the end, we decided to begin working with the small amount of money we had to see what we could do.

We began by organizing a resource center with the materials we had collected from women's groups. We also started publishing a bulletin that reported on and reproduced documents from the Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, which was held in Brussels in 1976. Modest and simple though it was, our work generated responses from women around the world who began writing to us, sending us copies of their publications and asking for information.

Over the past two decades, the materials in the information and resource center have grown tremendously, reflecting the extent of the growth of the women's movement. This collection also indicates the wide range of issues being taken up by



An Isis International poster is pasted on the window of the first office in Rome

women and the variety of media being used and produced by women's groups. Women were producing magazines, books, pamphlets, films, video, radio programs, drama, dance, songs, posters, photographs, woven cloth and many other kinds of visual arts and crafts.

Over the years, Isis International's publications also expanded, multiplied and covered nearly all the different issues that women all over the world are concerned with.

Indeed, Isis International has grown and evolved along with the women's movement. While our basic mission has remained the same over the years, the ways we have sought to achieve this have been varied.

## Highlights and Milestones

**1976:** Isis participates in the first Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, held in Brussels, Belgium. Isis's first International Bulletin reports on the Tribunal and reproduced some of the testimonies. The



Tribunal proposes the creation of the International Feminist Network and asks Isis to coordinate and mobilize international protests against specific cases of crimes against women as well as raise support for women victims of crimes.

**1978:** Isis opens its first offices in Geneva and Rome.

**1979:** Isis begins producing publications in Spanish as well as in English. Exiled Chilean women who joined Isis International's Rome office took responsibility for putting out the Spanish edition.

Isis helps organize and participates in the NGO parallel meeting to the world Conference on Agriculture and Rural Development, held in Rome. Together with other women, Isis tries to ensure that women's voices were heard and that the NGO meeting took account of the fact that women are the world's major food producers and keepers of indigenous knowledge.

**1980:** Together with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Isis produces the *International Women and Health Guide*, the first book to cover women's health issues and organizing in all parts of the world.

Isis participates in the NGO forum in Copenhagen at the Mid-Decade World Conference on Women. At this meeting, Isis did its best to provide space for women's groups who were unable to secure their own workshop space at the Forum.

**1982:** Isis organizes and hosts the Third International Women and Health Meeting in Geneva. This was the first in a series of Health Meetings. It

raised sufficient funds to ensure the participation of women from all continents, making the gathering a truly international meeting.

**1983:** The Isis book *Women and Development: A Resource Guide for Organization and Action* is published after several years of work. Breaking ground as the first feminist critique of "integrating women in development," the book questioned the model of development being promoted by international organizations, showed women's already crucial contribution to development and discussed the women's perspective of development issues.

Isis's office in Geneva organizes an international women's cross-cultural exchange program.

In the same year, the two Isis offices in Rome and Geneva decide to become separate organizations. At that time, Isis was still trying to work as one collective in two different cities, but this was becoming increasingly difficult as staff and work expanded. The Geneva office decides to concentrate its efforts on the exchange



A sampling of Isis International's early publications.



program and became Isis-Wicce (Women's Cross-Cultural Exchange).

Meanwhile, the Rome office adds International to its name and continued developing information and communication activities. It starts producing new publications that included books and the magazine *Women in Action*. The two organizations maintain friendly relations and continue to cooperate.

**1984:** Isis International decides to open an office in Santiago, Chile to take responsibility for its work in Latin America and the Caribbean. Two of Isis International's Chilean staff members return to Chile from exile to start Isis International-Santiago.

A meeting of Latin American and Caribbean women decides to create the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network. Isis International-Santiago is asked to coordinate it and publish the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Journal. In the past 10 years, this network grew and expanded. In 1995, it was time for the Network to become a separate organization. Isis International-Santiago continues to provide the Network documentation support.

Still in 1984, Isis International-Rome organizes a meeting to prepare for the Nairobi World Conference on Women and NGO Forum. Thirty women's networks and organizations from all the regions of the world attend. On the first day of the meeting, Italian air traffic controllers went on strike, stranding many participants half-way around the world! But this did not stop the intrepid women who rerouted their flights to other countries and continued on by train, or staged sit-ins in airline offices to get on the next flight.

**1985:** This year, Isis International-Rome publishes the audiovisual resource guide *Powerful Images*, which brings together women's experiences in the use of

audiovisual resources. The book also has an annotated resource listing of films, videos and other audio-visuals produced by women.

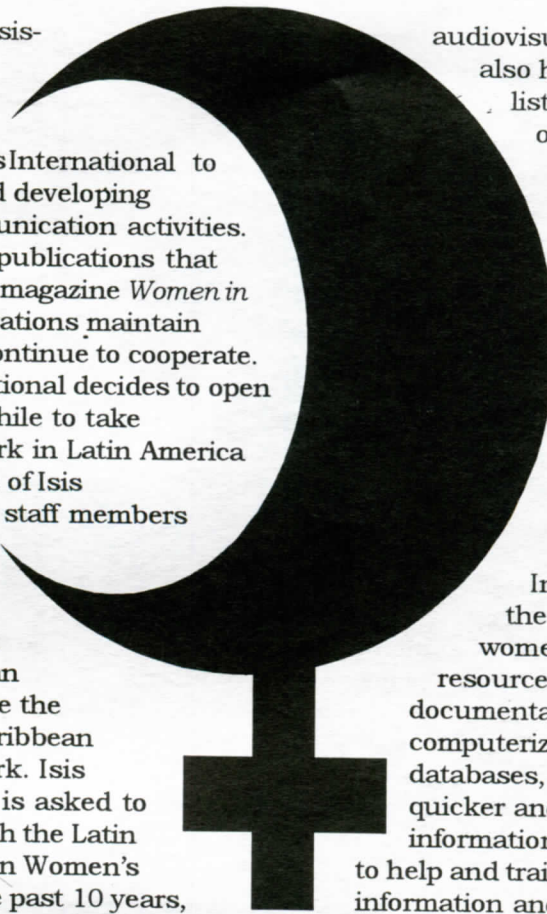
This year's other landmark is *Women and Media*, a book that was the product of the collaboration among Isis International-Rome, the Pacific and Asian Women's Network and Kali for Women in India.

From 1985 onwards, Isis International pioneers in the computerization of womens' information and resource centers. By entering its documentation collections into computerized bibliographic databases, Isis is able to provide quicker and far more complete information services. Isis is also able to help and train other women's information and resource centers in building and maintaining both manual and computerized documentation collections while promoting networking among these centers.

**1988:** Isis makes a major decision to transfer its operations from the North (Rome) to the South. The idea had been maturing for several years as Isis longed to be closer to women's groups in the South, which comprise the majority of groups Isis was working with. The move is symbolically important since it reverses the traditional pattern common among international organizations to locate offices and resource collections in the North.

**1991:** After years of working towards the move, Isis International-Rome finally transfers to Asia. It puts down new roots in Manila and is nurtured with the energy and enthusiasm of a new team and Board of Trustees.

**1992:** Isis International-Manila







**The women of Isis.** From left, foreground: Elvira Garcia-Colobong, Maria Victoria Cabrera-Balleza, Teresita Camacho, Lilian Mercado Carreon. Next row: Florian Taldo, Gemma Moraga, Rosalie Mendoza, Rhona Bautista, Marianita Villariba, Mylene Soto Sol-Cruz, Irene Chia. Not in photo: Luz Martinez, Concepcion Garcia-Ramillo, Florence Reyes, Nancy Arcellana, Benily Valerio, and Chari Sabado.

**1992:** Isis International-Manila assists Isis-Wicce Geneva in planning and doing a feasibility study for the latter's move to Africa.

**1993:** The work of the new office in Manila blossoms and expands with many new activities, including the publication of *Women Envision*. *Women Envision* provided information and promoted participation in the Beijing World Conference on Women as well as other international meetings and campaigns.

Isis International-Manila plays a significant role at the regional and international levels of the preparations for the Beijing Conference and NGO Forum .

**1994:** Isis International- Manila, the

World Association for Christian Communication and the International Women's Tribune Centre organize the Women Empowering Communication Conference in Bangkok.

Isis International-Manila, in order to better meet the demands of its growing work, decides to focus on Asia and the Pacific.

An International Advisory Committee is formed, composed mainly of women from Asia and the Pacific in order to increase the input and commitment of more women to the work of Isis International-Manila.

**1996:** Isis International-Manila is given consultative status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council. )