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## **Reinventing Sisterhood after the Cold War: Practicing Transnational Feminism in the Post-communist Context**

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### **Motto:**

*"People with common concerns first form a network. They get to know each other, start to exchange information. Activists learn that they are not alone in this world, that there are other people in this city, in this country, in this world who share their concerns. This is all about togetherness, sharing, helping, horizontal interaction."\**

### **1. The Network of East-West Women: a main women's rights actor in the post-communist context**

The Network of East-West Women (NEWW, see [www.neww.eu](http://www.neww.eu)), based in Gdansk since 2003, has been one of the best-known regional actors working on women's issues in the former Soviet influence area. Informally set up in the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War, the NEWW kept growing over the last 20 years and it became an important player in the global feminist arenas, as indicated by its numerous projects and institutional cooperation with more than a hundred human rights and feminist national and international organizations. Numerous women's groups in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union have been benefitting from its support: grants and fellowships, know-how, technical assistance, library and teaching resources. On the other hand, meetings with NEWW's members and taking part in its activities appear as crucial developments in recently published accounts on the feminist issues' legitimization and the establishment of gender studies as a new field of academic inquiry in various national settings in the ex-socialist countries<sup>1</sup>.

The Network of East-West Women started in the aftermaths of the 1990 Socialist Scholars Conference organized at New York University. A polemic presentation by a Yugoslav writer bringing up the issue of shortages and their effects on women's everyday life under socialism raised the attention of radical American feminists. In order to learn more about their experiences and share ideas and concerns,

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\*Email letter, 16.05.1997, Ann Snitow's personal archives.

<sup>1</sup> See for examples Daskalova 2010, 2011; also Wöhrer 2004, 2006; Zimmermann 2007; Grünberg 2008; Fodor, Varsa 2009. We have also documented in our previous work the role played by transatlantic feminist activism in the processes of pioneering gender research and teaching in Romania, and more generally in the East-European context (Cîrstocea 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

they decided to organize a gathering with East-European women, which would take place in June 1991 in Dubrovnik (then Yugoslavia), has been known as the first East-West women's conference<sup>2</sup> and marked NEWW's official launching.

In the early years, the network used to function in a rather informal way: the American nucleus had been keeping organizing regular private meetings and dinners as well as visits and lectures for East-European scholars, or *ad-hoc* gatherings aimed at facilitating their orientation in the US academic milieus but also at keeping in touch with the evolutions in the ex-socialist countries. They had also been compiled and circulated information materials, organized a telephone tree, maintained an up to date repertoire of networks' members and sympathizers. The NEWW had been institutionalized little by little over the 1990s: provided with an international steering committee in 1993, it was later incorporated as an American organization, got a Polish branch in the late 1990s and had finally moved to Poland.

After the incorporation, the organization could obtain various financial supports from main international aid providers, among others philanthropic foundations Ford and Soros<sup>3</sup>. It therefore could run several projects (see below) which allowed it to grow into a strong regional actor working towards creating and developing a practical and also an epistemic transnational feminist community. Both through its formal and informal work, the NEWW had created and has been offering since the beginning of the 1990s an important space for transatlantic socialization as well as an important hub of information and contacts about/in Eastern Europe.

In the current contribution<sup>4</sup>, I would like to come back to the first years of the NEWW and focus on the contents of the exchanges possible in such a framework. In order to build my argument, I will discuss the organizing work's steps as well as some themes and issues dealt with over the 1990s. I consider NEWW's early history as a paradigmatic case of feminist internationalism practice. It illustrates well the transnationalization/globalization of women's rights activism (Naples, Desai 2002; Moghadam 2005; Ferree, Tripp 2006; Desai 2005; Dufouret *al* 2010) after the Cold War and sheds new light on the contemporary international production and circulation of ideas (Bourdieu 2002) and militant practices (Siméant 2010). On the other hand, this history gives an insight into a few classical and also sensitive aspects of feminism thinking and organizing, namely the formalization of activism<sup>5</sup>, or the symbolic conditions of practicing solidarity beyond cultural differences and economic inequalities: Which aspects of feminist activities does institutionalization serve? Which others does formal organization discard? How to formulate mobilization issues in a way that they represent women with diverse social grounds and political experiences? During its early years, the NEWW had to deal with all these questions. The options that have been made illustrate a peculiar way of understanding and practicing internationalism, as well as a genuine form of feminist "transversal" and "reflexive" politics (Yuval Davis 1997) in a given historical and political situation.

In spite of its fame and his already quite long history, the NEWW has been rather understudied, even if a lot of well-known pieces of literature on gender and post-communism

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<sup>2</sup> Its primacy consists in being unofficial, informal, grassroots, therefore different from events organized in institutional frames, such as the UN conferences, or the congresses of international women's organizations like the WIDF (Popa 2009; de Haan 2010; Ghodsee 2010; Ilic 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Over the following years, the latter would also be co-opting some of NEWW's human resources while building its programs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Cîrstocă 2010b; 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Part of a wider project, this paper presents the first results of my research on NEWW's archives and interviews with its funding members.

<sup>5</sup> See Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999, 2008 on the "NGOization of feminism"; see *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 24, 2, 2005 on "dissident" and "autonomous" feminisms.

refer to situations encountered through its experience<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, important collections of studies have been edited as an outcome of projects, meetings and scholar exchanges involving people connected to the network<sup>7</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to question social and symbolic mechanisms at stake in a particular process of transnationalization of feminism, taking as an entry point the main social actors, their resources and the strategies they have invented in their practice of international cooperation. In order to make this case, I use personal interviews with prominent founding members of the NEWW as well as information from private archives kindly made available to me by Ann Snitow (see below)<sup>8</sup>, corroborated with findings from my previous work on pioneering gender studies and academic feminism in Romania and the ex-socialist countries (Cîrstocea 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011).

## 2. *"I have a map on my wall": Ann Snitow's visionary project*

### 2.1. NEWW People

After the 1990 Socialist Scholars Conference, a small group started meeting in New York in order to plan a gathering with East-European women. Their previous experience in feminist communicating, organizing, information spreading, and fund-raising is the crucial resource that made possible the building of the network. The US-based pole of what would become the NEWW took shape around Ann Snitow, at that time literature professor at the New School for Social Research (NSSR) and a well-known radical feminist and pacifist activist. Uncontested leading figure of the network until now, she is pictured by her fellows as *"a powerful figure"*, *"a brilliant organizer"*, *"the real force behind the network"*, *"a feminist powerhouse"*, *"someone who put in NEWW project a lot of energy and a lot of personal money"*<sup>9</sup>. She was born in 1943 and raised by an educated Jewish middle-class family of East-European descents and left-wing political tradition<sup>10</sup>. Holder of a PhD degree from the University of London (1978), she had pioneered women's studies at Rutgers University (New Jersey) and the NSSR, where she has been teaching literature and women's studies. She also had authored a series of popular books and contributions to various magazines and journals and she had been animating for many years one of the first feminist radio shows in the US<sup>11</sup>. As she explains it retrospectively, put apart curiosity and interest in knowing more about life under socialism, the events taking place in Eastern Europe in the 1990s offered to her a new opportunity for feminist action, political reflection and practicing convictions based on long militant experience<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Among the oldest and best known, see Funk 1993, Busheikin 1997 (1993).

<sup>7</sup> To quote only a few: Funk, Mueller 1993; Scott *et al.* 1997; Lukicet *al.* 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Field research had been conducted in the US in Fall 2010 thanks to a grant awarded by the French-American Fulbright Commission. I warmly thank it here together with my host institution, the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University New Jersey, and all the persons who answered my questions: Nanette Funk, Joanna Regulska, Sonia Jaffe Robbins, Debra Schultz, Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, Joan W. Scott, and especially Ann Snitow, who also generously gave me access to her private archives (personal correspondence and notes from the gatherings, reports and publications of NEWW).

<sup>9</sup> Quotes from personal interviews with Nanette Funk (13.09.2010), Joanna Regulska (19.10.2010), Sonia Jaffe Robbins (3.10.2010).

<sup>10</sup> Her mother, a schoolteacher, was a communist and feminist activist, her father a successful business lawyer.

<sup>11</sup> She describes herself as *« a feminist activist who had a job in the university »* (personal interview with Ann Snitow, 2.10.2010). See also Love 2006, 433 for a short biography.

<sup>12</sup> *"They (women in Eastern Europe) gona have capitalism and they think it's great and we know there is a problem... - particularly the neoliberalism that was coming then, in the 1990s, that was terrible, neo-liberal conservative politics, economic politics (...) They were not prepared to understand what was at stake there."* (personal interview with Ann Snitow, 2.10.2010); *"We were radicals, we wanted post-communism to be a*

She was surrounded and supported by people sharing activist history and political dispositions<sup>13</sup>, especially women's/gender studies scholars and/or specialists of Eastern Europe and more broadly persons interested in the region due to their family roots, memories of exile, or political orientation. Nanette Funk is one of the most active founding members of the network: she is a radical feminist of East-European Jewish descents, professor of philosophy at New York University. Specializing in German studies, she has been active in Marxist feminist groups in New York, she had been participated in leftist conferences since the 1970s and she had been studying and travelling in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. In our interview she mentioned contacts in Hungary, Yugoslavia, East Germany and Russia as well as her grand-families based in Bratislava and Belgrade. Having eye-witnessed the collapse of Berlin Wall, she had been "*fascinated*" by "*the transformation in front of (her) eyes*" and found "*extremely exciting*" to have an insight on it while focusing on women's situation and fighting against emerging forms of gender injustice<sup>14</sup>. Being involved with the NEWW has been for her a stimulating political and intellectual experience worthy of "*investing one's life in it*". In a context characterized in her opinion by fading militant momentum in the US<sup>15</sup>, orienting her activism towards the Eastern Europe had been therefore a way of keeping awake a political *habitus*.

Sonia Jaffe Robbins is another founding member of the network and one of its main animators on a daily basis during the early 1990s. Holder of a degree in literature and journalism, feminist activist and a "red-diaper baby"<sup>16</sup> of East-European Jewish descent, she was preparing a book manuscript in order to get a tenured job within the New York University when she got involved in organizing the NEWW. She would finally abandon academic work and dedicate her time and her energy to feminist activism - she had been NEWW's first administrator and had been employed by it since 1993 to 1996. Twenty years later, when recalling that experience, she describes it as "*the most exciting thing I have ever been through*" and considers the opportunity of meeting East-European and developing transatlantic feminist solidarities as a way of re-discovering her political and social roots: "*I really felt like I have come home*"<sup>17</sup>.

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*wonderful new period of social activism, of renegotiation of family role, a time of opportunity and change... We were hopeless idealistic...*" (personal interview with Ann Snitow, 19.09.2010).

<sup>13</sup> See below for more details about some of the founders and the most active members. Well known names of New York feminist and intellectual life, important actors of women's studies and women's rights in the US have participated in the early activities of the NEWW providing advice and support: Ellen Willis, Barbara Ehrenreich, Katha Pollitt, Vera Zolberg, Zillah Eisenstein, Mariam Chamberlain, Marjorie Lightman, Rhonda Copelon. This sociability *milieu* is a strategic resource for the network, ensuring its strategic connections with American academe, philanthropic foundations and government. Mariam Chamberlain, for instance, a former program officer in education and public policy at the Ford Foundation and the founding president of the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW, the main US women's studies professional association), is still on the board of NEWW Polska.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Nanette Funk, 13.09.2010.

<sup>15</sup> "*There was not much around about feminism here by the end of the 1980s, it was kind of dead...*", (Id.). Sonia Jaffe Robbins expressed a similar idea: "*In the US, feminism was in a sort of low (due to) Republican backlash against liberalism, feminism, human rights (...) Dubrovnik gave us an enormous energy (...) NEWW helped us re-energize*" (personal interview with Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010).

<sup>16</sup> Both her grandfathers were left activists and the family was strongly marked by McCarthy red-hunting (personal interview with Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010; see equally Jaffe Robbins 1998 for a published autobiographical account).

<sup>17</sup> In our interview, she recalled her vivid emotion when encountering in Dubrovnik several women wearing the same first name (quite rare in the US in her generation). Other interviewees emphasize the quasi-« psychoanalytic » dimension of the East-West encounters: for instance, Nanette Funk and Ann Snitow used the term « resilience » describing their personal emotional rapport with Eastern Europe, their family memories and their post-Cold War activism.

Last but not least, Joanna Regulska must be mentioned, as she has been one of the main builders of NEWW's institutional connections with US-based democracy promoters in the former Soviet bloc, especially the Soros Foundation. A Polish-born geographer, she had emigrated from Poland in the early 1980s and had built her academic career in the US, being also involved in setting up women's studies at Rutgers University. In the late 1980s she had participated in organizing study visits for Eastern-European women scholars through her university. She now considers that activity as a *sui generis* form of "transnational feminism", as these visits were intended to support developing women's studies courses and research<sup>18</sup>. When looking back to this history, she interprets the involvement with the NEWW and more broadly all her collaborative projects with Poland and Eastern Europe<sup>19</sup> as a way of "healing" the split identity of the exile and a "*feminist bridge*" connecting two selves - "*me in Poland and me in the US*" - and she considers such a hybrid experience as an important source of knowledge and therefore a precious resource for transnational activism<sup>20</sup>.

To sum up, for these US-based feminist activists, the involvement in a transatlantic political project is rooted in complex mechanisms mixing personal and political logics and also corresponding to the specific conditions of the post-Cold War moment. They shared a vision of the Iron Curtain's collapse as an opening of new grounds for taking political action, testing and practicing progressive ideas, trying to inject feminism at the very basis of the new democracies, while also nourishing their own academic careers with new opportunities for research projects and publications. Their activism was also supported by their will to reconnect with their families' past, from which geopolitics had been kept them away during many decades. For some of them, exchanging with East-European women was equally a way of confronting their leftist ideas with the lived experiences of socialist regimes. As indicated by lots of later accounts as well as by the wide literature focusing on the "East-West divide", this confrontation sometimes turned to be a disappointing and painful one (Frunză, Văcărescu 2004; Funk 2007; Cerwonka 2008; Cîrstoceă 2008).

As for the East-European founder of NEWW, Slavenka Drakulic, she was born in 1949 in a Yugoslav communist elites family and she had graduated in sociology and literature from Zagreb University (1976)<sup>21</sup>. In 1990 she had written several books, had been collaborating to several magazines and she had been a member of a feminist group of scholars, artists and journalists active for more than ten years in Yugoslavia. In late 1970s she had co-organized an international feminist conference in Belgrade and she co-authored a contribution in the world famous collection *Sisterhood Is Global* (Morgan 1984). It is worth mentioning here very briefly the exceptional situation of Yugoslavia, the only socialist country that had been allowed unofficial expression of feminist ideas as well as free international circulation and intellectual exchanges. All that would represent important resources for the early international exchanges of women from « East » and « West »: in 1990, Drakulic was the American *Ms.* magazine's special correspondent in Eastern Europe - her ample report based on interviews with women from the ex-socialist countries would be published in a Summer 1990 issue of *Ms.* The documentary material she had collected was a useful source of information for US feminists involved in launching the NEWW - for instance some of her interviewees and contacts in the ex-socialist countries were invited to participate to the first East-West meeting.

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<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with Joanna Regulska, 19.10.2010. See also her long biographic interview available on the website of "Global Feminisms Project" (University of Michigan), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/55694>.

<sup>19</sup> Since the early 1990s, she has been involved in international projects oriented towards reforming local politics in her home-country and she also has been very active in pioneering gender studies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, mainly through the programs of Central European University and Open Society Institute.

<sup>20</sup> Global Feminisms Project interview quoted above.

<sup>21</sup> <http://slavenkadrukulic.com>. For biographic information see also Drakulic 1992; 1993; 1996.

The US-based group's professional and personal address-books had also been used in order to reach as many East-European women as possible<sup>22</sup>. Following the assertions of my interviewees, the location of the conference was chosen on the suggestion of the Yugoslav counterpart. Besides its geographical location and its climate that make it a famous touristic resort, the historical city of Dubrovnik had been internationally known for the Inter-University Center (<http://www.iuc.hr>), an institute for advanced studies established in the early 1970s, which had hosted numerous conferences and appears as a hub of intellectual exchanges across the Cold War frontiers<sup>23</sup>. Together with the social profile of Slavenka Drakulic - both her political and intellectual legitimacy in her home context and her reputation in the US were well established in 1990 – the choice of such a place allow us to emphasize the role played by the Cold War resources and logics in the symbolism of NEWW.

## 2.2. The launching event

After a series of meetings and vivid exchange of ideas during the Summer 1990, the US-based group came out with an invitation:

*"We are ourselves the working group of what we hope will become a network of feminist women, hence the Network of East West Women, NEWW. We are all writers, professors and feminist activists. (...)*

*We were reading with alarm about possible loss of abortion rights, high rates of women's unemployment, and women's lack of representation in the new governments. (...)*

*Our goals are: first, to make an Eastern European dialogue across national boundaries about feminism and, second, to describe our own experience of developing a women's liberation movement – our successes and above all our failures to win things for women in a market economy. We will define our issues broadly, including anything that seems important to you, from housework to rape, from employment to wife beating. (...)*

*We hope you will agree that it would be useful to have an intimate but international conversation about how things are going for women in a quickly changing situation. What is the relation between women and the new governments? What forms does sexism take in everyday life? What kind of politics will really engage and benefit women in your country now, in the post-1989 world? (...)*

*We too, from the US, are eager to join the discussions and offer our thoughts about 20 years of feminism in the US, though we know very well that the differences in our experiences are enormous. Sharing information, we hope you will agree, is the opposite of a power relationship. Each of us will offer what she can in this exchange and each will take away whatever she can use. (...)*

*Please join us in this international networking of women. If you cannot come yourself, please help us find other women who might find support and we hope some delight in such an exchange."*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> My sources mention Slavenka Drakulic's reluctance to invite women from the Soviet Union at the first East-West meeting: considering that the URSS was a perpetrator of communist imperialism in Eastern Europe, she would invite everybody excepting the "enemy" (personal interview with Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010 and Ann Snitow, 19.09.2010).

<sup>23</sup> Nanette Funk had participated in summer schools organized there in the 1970s (personal interview, 13.09.2010).

<sup>24</sup> Letter, 29.10.1990, signed "In sisterhood" by Ann Snitow, "for the organizing committee in formation" (Ann Snitow's private archives).

65 women finally met in Dubrovnik between June the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> 1991: 19 of them were Americans, 21 Yugoslavs, 9 Polish, 5 Czech, 5 Germans, 4 Bulgarians, 1 Romanian, 1 Greek, 1 Ukrainian (then in the URSS). Some of their names would be longtime present on the political and intellectual scenes in East-European and/or in the international human and women's rights milieus<sup>25</sup>. Among them, some did not know anything about feminism or were leaving their country for the first time; others came to the conference with their families. The Westerners had offered books and journals, medicine and condoms<sup>26</sup>. A letter from Gloria Steinem, editor in chief of *Ms*, was addressed to the "East-European sisters", including also highly symbolic greetings from Robin Morgan.

The conference program included several thematic sessions and workshops as well as consciousness raising groups. Anne Snitow introduced the meeting with a warm statement stressing the importance of international feminist solidarity and activism in supporting and inspiring groups located in various national contexts. Slavenka Drakulic gave a keynote speech centered on the slogan "*Democracy without women is not democracy*" illustrating with figures the preoccupying situation of women in the post-socialist countries<sup>27</sup>. Both of them emphasized the potential of "sisterhood", the shared ground of women's condition in spite of differences, as well as the necessity of building solidarities across the frontiers in order to make their claims be heard.

Among the themes of the workshops, let us mention only a few: women and the family, women and work, sexuality and reproduction health, women's political participation and representation, models for feminist organizing and strategies for establishing women's studies... Very few participants having prepared papers in advance<sup>28</sup>, the format of the conference would finally be very flexible and would make room for a lot of informal discussions. It should be mentioned at that point that not everything went as intended by the organizers: some of the workshops were not attended - for instance the one dedicated to the work and moderated by a union's leader<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, the consciousness rising group's format - a classical way of practicing solidarity in the US feminist milieus, vividly recommended in Dubrovnik as a useful tool for connecting with each other - shocked some of the East-European participants which found it intrusive and did not understand the idea of describing private experience in front of unknown persons<sup>30</sup>. Besides, being accustomed to

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<sup>25</sup> To name but a few: Malgorzata Tarasiewicz, the current NEWW Polska leader, or Sonia Licht, president of the Open Society Foundation in Serbia, co-chair of Helsinki Citizens Assembly.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview with Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010.

<sup>27</sup> Quoting a UN report she referred to issues such as political representation, occupational segregation, poverty, pornography and prostitution, threats against women's reproductive rights. An international women's meeting organized in Dubna (Russia) in March 1991 by feminist economist Anastasia Posadskaya (see below) touched to similar questions and equally circulated the slogan "Democracy without women is not democracy" (see *Feminist Review* 39, 1991 for several accounts). Both Slavenka Drakulic and Anastasia Posadskaya had previously taken part in a UN meeting in Vienna, where they had presented papers in a special session dedicated to Eastern Europe (source: document RS/SWEE/1991/INF.4/Rev.1, 5 April 1991, English = the provisional program of the Regional Seminar on the Impact of Economic and Political reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe and the USSR: the Role of National Machinery, Vienna, 8-12 April 1991, United Nations Office, Vienna, Division for the Advancement of Women. We warmly thank Jacqueline Heinen, participant in the seminar, who communicated it to us).

<sup>28</sup> The US organizers had asked for short presentations aimed at facilitating the organization and preparing the exchanges. Correspondence prior to the meeting shows that the majority of the participants have omitted to do it.

<sup>29</sup> Personal interview with Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010. In the later exchanges, one of the issues of the « East-West misunderstanding » would be precisely different representations of women's work: the East-Europeans stress their feeling of being « overworked », as the socialist regimes had pushed them into the economic effort; on the other hand, the Westerners emphasize the importance of women's economic independence in relationship to men and family.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interviews with Nanette Funk, 13.09.2010, and Sonia Jaffe Robbins, 3.10.2010. These aspects echo another dimension of the so-called "East-West divide", namely the reluctance of East-Europeans to adopt the



formal and rigid political meetings, some of them would mock casual discussions considering them not enough serious or even senseless<sup>31</sup>. Such incidents announce what would be lived and theorized in the later exchanges as a proper cultural clash: my interviewees recalled their astonishment when discovering an unexpected “otherness” and the problematic aspects of proclaiming the collective identity of women with different political and social experiences<sup>32</sup>.

The meeting was closed by a general discussion about possible follow-ups. I will extensively list them here in order to give an idea about the original momentum and vision of NEWW, which would be orienting its activity over many years: set up a pressure group with the UN; put together a data bank; establish infrastructure necessary to keep in contact, exchange information and work together (a computer network is considered); publish a regular newsletter as well as country reports on women’s issues; organize an international telephone tree; disseminate classical feminist literature towards East-European publics; put in place scholarships, fellowships, grants and internships for women activists and academics; help establish women’s studies centers, programs and associations in Eastern Europe; collaborate with international programs already present in the region (Soros Foundation, and the European TEMPUS Program are quoted among others)<sup>33</sup>. A statement adopted at the end of the meeting and widely circulated thanks to the journalists who covered the conference resumes all these points and stresses the NEWW’s ambition to contribute to the “*development of a grassroots women’s movement in the ECE region*”. Ann Snitow reformulated the idea in a letter sent to the participants on June the 28<sup>th</sup> 1991:

*“Network will enable communication among CEE activists (...);*

*“(...) our priority as a small group is to develop communication systems across national lines (...) – whatever maximizes the chances for communication across borders, disciplines and issues (...).*

*I have a map of CEE on my wall and on hopeful days I see our Network as a series of proliferating lines drawn back and forth and everywhere, eroding borders, darkening into well-travelled roads leading into mobility, freedom, exchange, even delightful play”.*

### **3. “How to be both democratic and realistic?” From the loose network to the formal organization**

#### **3.1. Expanding**

In Fall 1991, the New York group had also started working on enlarging and consolidating the network. A document authored by Sonia Jaffe Robbins suggests opening a repertory of NEWW current or potential human resources, such as people having an expertise in the ex-socialist countries, or persons working on particular projects such as films or books on the region. A plan is also included, for translating and publishing feminist literature from English to the East-European languages and the other way around, but equally from one East-European language to another<sup>34</sup>.

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slogan “The personal is political”, in reaction to their experience of political control exerted by communist regimes over the private life of their citizens.

<sup>31</sup>Personal interview with Nanette Funk, 13.09.2010.

<sup>32</sup> Sonia Jaffe Robbins summed it up in our interview: “*we all wanted the same, namely equality and recognition of women as women full human beings (...) but we came from opposite background: (...) words like ‘struggle’ or ‘freedom’ had different connotations for us*”.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Snitow archives, notes and documents from Dubrovnik conference.

<sup>34</sup>Letter addressed by Sonia Jaffe Robbins to Ann Snitow, 5.02.1992 (Ann Snitow’s archive).

Already at the beginning of 1992, the first newsletters of NEWW were assembled and circulated<sup>35</sup>. These documents list new feminist groups and initiatives taking place in various East-European countries: for instance Ann Snitow's lectures on gender theory within a graduate program of the NSSR in Cracow; the opening of an East-West Center for Gender Studies and the organization of regular consciousness raising meetings in Prague<sup>36</sup>; a women's center studies to be opened at the Institute for Applied Social Sciences in Warsaw; a group called Feminist Network doing media campaigns in Hungary on a grant of the Global Fund for Women; a study group regularly meeting in New York; panels on East-European women at various international conferences (Socialist Scholars Conference, Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, etc.); new books and thematic issues of scientific journals; information about the activities and contact data of organizations with related interests; funds available for research; conference announcements; calls for applications and invitations to collaborate in various collective projects and programs... A general invitation to join the NEWW was also enclosed:

*"Dear Friend,  
If you have been thinking and worrying about women's changing situation in your country, and the rest of ECE, we invite you to join the NEWW (...) Please join us in this international networking of women. If you are developing projects that might benefit by network support, please let us know."*<sup>37</sup>,

as well as repeated questions and even a formal questionnaire intended to collect information about current activities:

*"(...) we need information from you. Let us know both the adventures and the problems, and let us keep alive Ann's vision of a proliferation of lines across the map of CEE" (...)*

*What are you doing? What women's activities are you engaged in? What conferences are you going to? What have you written that would interest network's members? Please let us know what you are up to, so we can pass on the information to other Network members. We can all benefit by knowing what other Network members are doing, what pitfalls you've encountered, how you've overcome them."*<sup>38</sup>

The network's founders continuously examined the most appropriate definition of its mission and profile - *"is the NEWW a service group for Eastern Europe or there is a mutual interest?"*<sup>39</sup>. In Spring 1992, a counselor was hired in order to professionally evaluate the organization in a managerial perspective and eventually help elaborating its future strategy<sup>40</sup>. After having traveled in three East-European countries and interviewed several NEWW's members, the specialist had listed its resources as well as its potential partners and competitors. As reads the strategic plan under the title "internal organizational analysis", the strengths of the group were considered to be its genuine combination of activists and academics, its strong international connections and the early involvement in Eastern Europe

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<sup>35</sup> In our interview she stressed the fact that she used to handcraft and send them piggybacking the technology and the mailing service of her university.

<sup>36</sup> Still active nowadays, it was first based in the personal apartment of the dissident sociologist Jirina Siklova; the early documents of NEWW refer to it as « our success story », as it was launched with NEWW support in the aftermath of Dubrovnik conference (source: notes from the 17.04.1992 meeting, Ann Snitow's archives).

<sup>37</sup> NEWW Newsletter, Summer 1992, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Letter addressed by Sonia Jaffe Robbins to Ann Snitow, 5.02.1992, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>40</sup> "NEWW Strategic Plan, first discussion draft" by Lenore Goldman, 15.04.1992, Ann Snitow's archives.

after the regimes' change. Among its weaknesses: the loose format, the lack of hierarchy, the prevalence of English speaking US-based members, the absence of any paid staff and of any concrete program. The recommended strategy – supposed to make the network credible from a funder's perspective - would be to *"find a clear niche of services that doesn't replicate other established groups and be driven by the Eastern women's needs"*<sup>41</sup>.

The discussions that followed tried taking into account these recommendations and a series of board meetings<sup>42</sup> concentrated on deciding the future orientation of the work. Among the questions intensively debated by the end of April: *"To what extent should/can the network be Eastern European driven?"*<sup>43</sup>; *"How to ask the question 'women' and let the priorities flow from the Eastern and Central Europe?"*; *"How to do it in a democratic way?"*. The pessimists stressed the risk of "patronizing" behavior and the socio-economic inequalities between East-European and US constituencies of the network, while the optimists emphasized the importance of *"starting the process and beginning the dialogue"*. Written exchanges from the same period focus also on discussing NEWW's operational and symbolic categories, namely the "East" and "West", the extent of the target-"region" and of the international cooperation: including or not the ex-URSS was part of this reflection, as well as the pertinence of using the label "West" - obviously too general given that no West-European country was represented in the network<sup>44</sup>.

Following the main principle circulated in the advertising documents – namely *"focus on the process of interaction and cross fertilization (considering that) the women's movement (...) can only benefit from an international perspective"*<sup>45</sup> - the group had been keeping exchanging information about new feminist organizations, resources centers in Eastern Europe, international conferences and publications. In order to have fresh news and enlarge the group, they had also been regularly inviting people who had traveled in/from Eastern Europe<sup>46</sup>. Informal exchanges have been crucial in keeping the NEWW aware of sensitive issues for women's condition in the ex-socialist countries, such as new legislation threatening their rights and freedoms: a draft law on abortion in Hungary or a draft Russian Constitution were discussed during a board meeting, while a special time was dedicated to reproductive rights and abortion in the ex-socialist countries at the NEWW general meeting on 1.04.1993. The group regularly hosted new guests and enlarged by this mean the set of issues to be considered. In Winter 1992 Rada Ivekovic was introduced, a founding member of the feminist Belgrade 1978 group, who reported on war in Yugoslavia, rape and ethnic cleansing. In order to get to act concretely and launch a public campaign, Rhonda Copelon, a US-based well-known human rights international expert, was equally convened and she made a long presentation of available UN tools and international legislation on the matter.

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<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> Meetings were convened via the telephone tree and they took place once or twice a month, usually at Ann Snitow's place. The average number of participants goes up to 25 persons (source: notes from the meetings, attendance sheets with personal information, Ann Snitow's archives).

<sup>43</sup> Notes from the 28.4.1992 meeting, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Vera Zolberg to Ann Snitow and Sonia Jaffe Robbins (6.05.1992) providing feedback on NEWW's "strategic plan" discussed during the 28.04.1992 meeting (Ann Snitow's archives).

<sup>45</sup> Letter to NEWW's members signed by Sonia Jaffe Robbins and Ann Snitow, 4.05.1992 (Ann Snitow's archives).

<sup>46</sup> "...You have to realize we all knew each other, all the people who did this in the first 5 years knew each other; it was like 50 people, you know..." (interview with Ann Snitow, 2.10.2010); "...if it was 10 years before and you were you and there weren't be as much scholarships and exchanges as it happens right now, and you were interested in women's studies, somehow you would get connected to Ann Snitow, you would stay in her apartment, we would come together for some gathering, we would all be excited to think about what kind of project to do together" (personal interview with Debra Schultz, 29.09.2010).

By the end of 1992, the idea of formally incorporating the organization was formulated<sup>47</sup> and the preoccupation of fundraising became central. Later on, the proposal of establishing an international steering committee (ISC) appeared also: this governing body of a dozen people (*“half from the region”*) was imagined as a *“guiding policy group and the operational heart of the organization”*. It would ensure a communication function and *“enable as much information distribution as possible”*<sup>48</sup>. Among its tasks: *“assemble feminists, contact, recruit for the NEWW, inform everyone on everyone’s movements, put together an electronic newsletter”*<sup>49</sup>. The question of representation had also been raised: *“how is each nation going to constitute its group, chose its representative?”*<sup>50</sup>.

Showing both the dimensions of the demand and the echo of NEWW’s practical proposals, the network quickly became an essential source of information and contacts providing useful resources not only to feminist scholars but equally to everybody interested in reaching and studying the region of Eastern Europe. By the end of 1993, the expanding demand had become impossible to manage with the only means of an informal group. Ann Snitow describes that situation in a touching letter intended to explain to the members and sympathizers the necessity of fundraising and organizing in a proper formal way:

*“Dear Friends,*

*Help! I started with a kitten, the idea of a network that would link feminists in the West with feminists in the new post-communist countries, and when I turned around this little kitty was a big lion requiring a few pounds of raw meat a day.*

*The Network of East-West Women seemed like a manageable idea but the growth of the thing – which is wonderful – is way but beyond our capacity to respond rapidly or well to all demands on our services. Calls pour in: foundations need names of activists in Bulgaria, women’s studies programs in Belgrade, SOS lines in Poland. And women in all those places need the names of those foundations; they need books, contacts, ideas about what women might do as their situation changes daily (...).*

*Though the Network is large (500 people often with 50 showing up from all over at general meetings (...)) the small group of us who try to keep it on track on a day to day way can’t help but fail some of these people, however urgent or interesting their projects. We simply don’t have a solid enough structure in place yet. No offices, no staff, no budget, no fully formed international steering committee, no email network for shared decision making and general back and forth, East and West. Instead we all have full time jobs in addition to the Network and in the push and shove, the time-consuming and the clumsy processes of democracy can sometimes suffer.*

*After three years of doing all kind of support and communication projects on a shoe string (...) we have a good idea of what we need: We need two paid coordinators, East and West and an international steering committee that will run the organization by a lateral democratic exchange using an electronic computer network. (...)*

*This is the grow-or-die moment for the network. “*

A professional consultant was hired to help further formalizing the group<sup>51</sup>, while *“network’s central identity”* had been stressed again, as well as *“the belief that contact over borders is in itself a part of the freedom we seek: to debate, to exchange ideas, to build*

<sup>47</sup> Agenda of the 30.09.1992 meeting, Ann Snitow’s archives.

<sup>48</sup> Notes from the 21.03.1993 meeting, Ann Snitow’s archives.

<sup>49</sup> Notes from the 10.03.1993 meeting, Ann Snitow’s archives.

<sup>50</sup> Documents of NEWW’s board meeting, 21.03.1993, Ann Snitow’s archives. The creation of the ISC was acted on the 1.04.1993.

<sup>51</sup> NEWW Newsletter, Spring 1993.

*international communities*”<sup>52</sup>. During the following years, the formal organization went on and the membership kept growing. After the incorporation in Washington DC, the NEWW, now managed by an experienced executive director<sup>53</sup>, obtained funds that allowed launching its first big structured projects: “*On-Line Project*”, “*East-East Legal Committee*”, “*Book and Journal*”. Started with the support of the East-East program of Soros Foundation, “East-East Legal Committee” had been granting fellowships to young East-European law scholars in order to support their professional trainings within international and US-based institutions specializing in women’s rights<sup>54</sup>. As for “Book and Journal” it represents the formalized version of NEWW’s already traditional activity since Dubrovnik, consisting in donating feminist literature to women’s group based in Eastern Europe<sup>55</sup>.

### 3.2. Practicing solidarity at a distance: NEWW On-Line initiative

Presented as the “*first women’s electronic network linking women’s rights advocates in former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe*”, the On-Line initiative was launched in Summer 1994 with support from Eurasia Foundation, Ford Foundation, Mac Arthur Foundation, and World Learning. Advertising documents and reports emphasize the empowering effects of new technologies and picture electronic communication as “*reliable, steady, affordable (...), ideally suited for citizen groups and democracy champions*”<sup>56</sup>. Vividly welcomed by its beneficiaries, the On-Line project had been opened 30 mail accounts for women’s groups during its first year and trained 150 women during the first semester of the year 1995<sup>57</sup>. When accounting on that experience, the trainers recall that some of the beneficiaries of the program started from the very level of “*how to switch computer, how to use mouse*”<sup>58</sup>. In their turn, the women newly connected to internet sent to the NEWW messages showing their gratitude and their enthusiasm: “*this is really magic (...), a technical witchcraft!*”<sup>59</sup>. In order “*to give example of (NEWW’s) accomplishments*”, the symbolic date 8th of March was chosen for opening the Internet connection offered to the Romanian feminist group AnA based in Bucharest<sup>60</sup>.

A few figures from a project’s report issued on the 15.11.1996 resume its activity over the first ten months of the year 1996: the messages exchanged through the computer network are 14% sent by NEWW, 11% contact information request; 9,6% research on the region, gender and technology 9,2% NEWW’s programs, 9,2%

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<sup>52</sup>*Id.*.

<sup>53</sup>Shana Penn, participant in Dubrovnik conference, specialist in history and Jewish studies. She was preparing at that time a book on women in the Polish Solidarity movement (Penn, 2005). Benefiting from her previous experience with various think-tanks, she had raised important amounts of money and helped launching NEWW’s first large organized projects.

<sup>54</sup> Launched in Budapest in June 1994, it put together lawyers and women’s rights advocates around a project on comparing laws on violence against women, divorce, child support, etc. in several ex-socialist countries and the US.. During a meeting in Warsaw in August 1995 the possibility of organizing an East-European women’s caucus for the Beijing conference was equally considered (*NEWWNewsletter*, Summer 1995).

<sup>55</sup>Such a program still exists nowadays within NEWW Polska.

<sup>56</sup> At that time the proportion of the population having access to Internet was extremely low: a NEWW internal report quotes 10% for the US, adding that, given technological and economic gap, the figures would be insignificant for the ex-socialist countries (source: printed announcements “for immediate release” advertising NEWW On-line initiatives and *NEWW Newsletter*, Summer 1995, Ann Snitow’s archives).

<sup>57</sup>*Id.*

<sup>58</sup>*Id.*

<sup>59</sup>*Id.*

<sup>60</sup>*Id.*. See Grünberg 2008, 84-110 for symmetric accounts by a NEWW’s member and aid receiver.

organizations and individuals in the region, 5,6% fundraising, 4,6% information regarding the region, 3,9% NEWW's publications, 4,8% technical support, 2,6% international organizations and individuals, 2,2% legal resources, etc.. As for the users, they were in July 1996 52,2% Americans, 14,1% from the CEE, 9,3% Europeans. The topics of the mails exchanged via women-east-west list between October 1995 and February 1996 are the following: discussion and greetings 19,5%, announcements of events 14,7%, news from the participants in the On-line program 10%, projects description 8,9%, NEWW announcements 8,9%, news from the region 7,9%, profiles of organizations 4,7%, current actions 3,2%, publications 3,2%, information and requests for contacts 2,6%, job announcements 2,6%, fellowships and internships 2%, seminars and conference reports 2,1%, etc.. The source of the messages is mainly the NEWW office (30%), followed by women from the ECE (30%), and the US women (19%).

Whatever dry, such data are useful since they show that NEWW's initiative allowed East-European women be aware of the time's issues in the international women's rights initiatives and participate in designing them. Indeed, through endowing feminist groups with computers, internet technology and training them to use it, the project actually put into existence Ann Snitow's vision of a map of traversed by links connecting women's group across the borders and enabling them to know each other, exchange ideas, build collaborative projects. It's worth mentioning also that the project was launched at a time of high international momentum for women's and gender equality issues, namely the period of the UN-organized conferences (on population, human rights, and women), that strongly marked international politics during the first post-communist decade. If connecting women internationally has always been one of the main purposes of NEWW, the On-Line initiative put it in practice in a very concrete way: the NEWW established a general information service ("women-east-west" mailing list, still active nowadays) and equally a special one dedicated to the Beijing conference (the "neww.beijing" list serve), intended to facilitate access to the latest information about the world gathering. Moreover, NEWW's members and trainers of the On-Line project were present on the UNDP train to Beijing and provided computer and Internet using assistance to several groups of conference participants.

Last but not least, the On-Line project equally helped consolidating NEWW's democratic ambition. During the years 1995 and 1996, computer and Internet technology had been used for the organization of a series of remote-meetings of the international steering committee<sup>61</sup>. Including 19 participants from which 16 were based in various ECE countries and 3 in the United States, as well as 9 observers from the NEWW's head quarters, they were intended to discuss the organization's government and strategy and to establish democratic decision making. At the beginning, moderator Sonia Jaffe Robbins sent to everybody a set of documents raising the question of representation and consensus within the network and asking also for suggestions about the future role and functioning of the steering committee or the decision process concerning the priority projects of the network.

Before entering the on-line debate, everybody was asked to introduce herself. Besides the fact that they give a useful insight into the sociological profiles of these genuine practitioners of international feminism, the autobiographical narratives allow further discussion about cultural and political differences in their respective understanding of the « militant self », as well as various phases of learning new interaction codes. Some of the East-Europeans offered lots of precise information

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<sup>61</sup> Source : documents of NEWW's International Steering Committee On-Line Meetings, 1995-1996, Ann Snitow's archives.

about their professional and political activity, their degrees and their official responsibilities (following maybe also the narrative schemes of the autobiography requested by communist political control services), while other focused on very personal details about their families and hobbies (children's names, pets, secondary residences, etc...). As for the Americans, they stress their activist experience and their accomplishments as feminists. Some of them end their mails with the formula *"In sisterhood"*.

The bylaws of the organization, as well as the modalities of choosing its representatives and its priorities were discussed and voted via email. In order to give an idea about the general atmosphere, we can quote a few of the participants' interventions. For instance, Romanian Mihaela Miroiu found that the role of the ISC would be to act as an advisory group and also as an evaluator of the projects submitted under NEWW's label, while for the Bulgarian Christina Kotchemidova it *"should help with shaping projects, offer guidelines"* and keep being *"open to projects coming from all NEWW members"*. The Russian Olga Lipovskaya was interested in *"working together on international projects"* and she would see the ISC useful in *"generating ideas"*, *"brainstorming"*, giving *"examples of projects"*, echoing the Lithuanian Regina Lapiene and the Polish Ursula Novakowska, who respectively suggested the ISC to *"generate projects and support"* and *"concrete advice"*, or provide *"draft guidelines for proposal writing"*, *"identify and contact donors"*, *"disseminate information"* and *"encourage local activity"*. Several participants formulated the idea of *"needs analysis"* to be done prior to launching any further projects, while a few of them raised the issue of symbolic and material inequalities separating the members of the network: *"situations of domination"* were mentioned by the Slovak Etela Farkasova, while the Bulgarian Rosica Panova sent a moving message resuming the economic difficulties in her country:

*"There is NO BREAD in the country (...) due to restrictions imposed by the IMF (...). The Bulgarian people are starving. (...) Could the ISC projects and discussions be relevant to the people from Eastern Europe? Isn't the West too far from us?"*

Last but not least, the problem of the balance between "East" and "West" initiatives was formulated again. The American Miriama Williams openly stressed the idea that the *"proposals should come from the region, the people on the ground"*, which she considered *"best able to determine what is needed"*; *"ISC must be aware of wider macroeconomic and global trends (...) of more general funding trends or currents and in that case generate a proposal"*. For her, the question is *"how to do this without appearing to directly intervene in local regional affairs"*. Meanwhile, she equally considers that people in the US *"can see to a greater extent than the groups in the region the overall picture"*. This sensitive aspect would remain one of the constant topics under debate over the following years and the decision to open a branch in Eastern Europe would finally answer to the difficulty of managing the distance between NEWW's Western head-quarters and its Eastern constituency.

On-line consultations of the ISC would also be intensively used by the end of the 1990s, after a moment of internal crisis. A focus group launched in October 1998 discussed again better ways of working in a transatlantic perspective. Questions on network's identity, its mission, its priorities and its products, members' responsibilities and benefits had been asked. The members' answers had been discussed during a board meeting in New York. Participants acknowledged NEWW's delicate position as an organization located outside the Eastern Europe and therefore too distanced from its grassroots - *"We can't be political in a*

*place from the outside*". One of the main limits of their action was equally re-acknowledged, namely the *"odd relationship to expertise"*, coupled with a strong and constant will to keep loose and not formalize the organization too much. The outcome of this consultation would be a document stressing the *"need to develop a second financial and administrative base in a country in the region where staff and projects function"*<sup>62</sup>.

### 3.3. Collaborating and competing in the field of women's rights promotion

It is useful to stress at this point that, besides its own projects already mentioned, NEWW had also been strongly involved in establishing gender studies program at the Central European University in Budapest (organized under the patronage of the Soros Foundation), as well as in the organization of the Open Society Institute's regional women's program (Cirstocea 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Network's intellectual and human resources played a strategic role in launching both these initiatives: Ann Snitow and Joanna Regulska provided contacts and know-how to Soros officers and they concretely took part in the organization of the OSI's programs, that could benefit from NEWW's audience, its legitimacy, its overlapping (academic and activist) capacities and skills. Over the years, the relationship with the philanthropic actor had been complex: they could complement but also compete each other, knowing that they targeted the same "niche" (namely the women from the ex-Soviet area), even if using different approaches and mobilizing different resources and means. In such a competition and given the more and more international dimension of gender issues and women's rights promotion, the "structurelessness" of the transatlantic women's group became in a way a handicap. The following example could give a clear idea about this collaboration-competition relationship.

In the mid-1990s, the NEWW's board was looking for a new executive director, after Shana Penn' resignation, at a moment when the constituency had considerably grown<sup>63</sup>. Following the idea of a more organized functioning without sacrificing its radical political orientation<sup>64</sup>, NEWW published a job announcement listing the following criteria<sup>65</sup>: *"fundraising and contacts; international experience; management skills; feminist with experience in the movement; NGO experience; a language of our region; 2-3 year commitment"*. Internal documents show that NEWW received 100 applications and interviewed 8 people<sup>66</sup> before finally assigning the position to Raven James - introduced by Ann Snitow as an *"experienced organizer and trainer"* having helped *"governments, businesses and community groups develop democratic practices in the complex post-communist situation (...), active for many years in the battered women's movement and AIDS activism"*<sup>67</sup>.

Before taking such a decision, NEWW's board had considered the possibility of proposing the position to a young Russian feminist Anastasia Posadskaya, a person actively involved in pioneering gender studies and feminist issues in Moscow, well connected to international feminist circles since the end of the 1980s (European Socialist Feminists,

<sup>62</sup> Source : "Organizational Development Overview", undated document, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>63</sup> Figures mentioned in the internal documents show that the membership grew exponentially over the first years, reaching 2000 persons in 1998 (source: letter from Ann Snitow to NEWW's board members, 24.01.1999); 100 emails daily are mentioned in notes from the 17.08 1995 board meeting.

<sup>64</sup> *"How to unite the organization's radical feminist platforms and consciousness raising missions with the practical aspects of running the nuts and bolts e-mail project, legal activities and other strategic projects?"*, notes from the 6-7.09.1996 board meeting, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>65</sup> Source : agendas of NEWW's board meetings, Fall 1996 and Spring 1997, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Ann Snitow to women-east-westlistserve, 12.11.1997.

<sup>67</sup> Source : undated letter from Ann Snitow to NEWW's « members and friends », indicating also that Raven James's contract with NEWW would start on 14.07.1997 (Ann Snitow's archives).



NCRW) and equally familiar with broader international organizations (she has been on the board of IRWHC since 1994). The NEWW newsletters and other documents mention the activities of her group in Moscow already in 1991 and her first personal contacts with the network go back to 1993, when she was invited to attend a meeting during a study visit in the US. In 1995 she was a visiting scholar at the Institute for Research on Women (Rutgers University) and she had equally participated in the East-East women's caucus in Beijing, being one of the authors of the "Statement from the non-region" delivered during the conference. Even if she did not completely fit the criteria stipulated by the job announcement, NEWW board considered her, together with a person from the NCRW, Debra Schultz, as a potential leader<sup>68</sup>: *"Do we want to choose our administrator over a visionary about the region? If not, can we afford to train her?"*<sup>69</sup>. While such debates had been taking place, Anastasia Posadskaya - who had also negotiated with the Ford Foundation - accepted a proposal from the Open Society Institute and she became the founding director of its Women's Program in Eastern Europe<sup>70</sup>. Her future career, with main international organizations such as Mama Cash, AWID and the UN show that the choice was a fairly profitable one.

#### **4. Sisterhood reinvented and the ages of feminist activism. A provisional conclusion**

This overview of NEWW is far from being complete. Still, the elements presented above allow me formulating a few provisional conclusions as well as paths for further analysis.

When NEWW had started, the "sisterhood" ideology was part of the well-established resources of Western women's activism based on Second Wave groups practice and political experience. Even if voices coming from non-hegemonic locations - namely postcolonial and Black feminists - had already expressed criticism of the universal solidarity of women, the actors I have considered here found this ideology useful in their attempt to start a dialogue with women from the former socialist countries. Such an initiative was not only aimed at including new voices in "international conversations" on women's rights, but also at giving a new momentum to their own activism and militant ethos through practicing old forms of feminist solidarity in the new context of the post-Cold War and on a new scale. As shown by their constant reflection and debates, the US feminists - all up to date academically and politically - were aware of differences among women and of their own privilege. Still, leaning on their history and on the general history of women's liberation movements, they considered international activism as a powerful tool and as one of the main resources for renewed women's struggles - *"contacts across borders are part of the freedom we are seeking for"*<sup>71</sup>.

Through their practice of international solidarity, they would discover the inglorious face of women's emancipation under the communist regimes and also the "otherness" of their differently socialized siblings. On the other hand, disappointed by socialist gender equality policies and mistrusting past political solutions to gender inequalities, the Easterners would learn through transnational dialogue how to build their own concerns and how to struggle for them. Facing the difficulty of multiple definitions of feminism in various locations, NEWW people choose to stick to an operational - even if highly theoretical - principle: considering

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<sup>68</sup> Notes from the 6-7.09.1996 board meeting, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>69</sup> Notes from the 21.12.1996 board meeting, Ann Snitow's archives.

<sup>70</sup> Launched in 1997, the program lasted for about ten years and was led by Anastasia Posadskaya and Debra Schultz (Cîrstocă 2010b, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> NEWW Newsletter, Spring 1993.

gender inequalities as a set of anthropologic invariants differently shaped from a socio-political context to another, the objective of East-West encounters and exchanges would be not to find common universal solutions for women's issues, but to cultivate critical sensitivity and identify questions to be raised in specific social settings - "*find meaningful entry points for feminist thinking*" and find also "*what feminism needs to be in different situations*"<sup>72</sup>. The Westerners see themselves as "enablers" for new feminisms in the ex-socialist countries and they consider their activity as an "empowering" one<sup>73</sup>. Both their practice and their permanent reflection over it show that they acknowledge their hegemonic position in international activism and the huge economic and technologic gaps separating them from women located on what then appears as a global periphery. Their practical strategy would be to challenge inequality by inventing a feminist utopia made of horizontal solidarity and transparent governance. NEWW choose to be pragmatic, filled up the geopolitically rooted gaps with intellectual resources, know-how and technology, and therefore contributed in its way to including more East-European women not only in an "international feminist conversation" but also in global activism and expertise on women's rights and gender over the postsocialist decades: publications, participation in conferences, teaching activities abroad, work with international organizations show it better than any other account.

On the other hand, NEWW's experience resumes well conflicting ages of feminist organizing and changing codes of women's rights promotion. When launching their grassroots initiative in the early 1990S, the US-based radical feminists armed with their Second Wave experience did not foresee that the reality of the following decade would challenge their attempt to practicing horizontal, non-hierarchic and loosely structured international feminist solidarity. In the post-Cold War era, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took over informal groups: promoted in the ex-socialist countries as democratization tools and seeds of civil society, the NGOs – considered by critical anthropology as primary agents of liberal globalization (Hours, Selim 2010) – became the privileged interlocutors of international cooperation agencies and philanthropic foundations. This is the reason why, in order to survive, the growing grassroots network found itself obliged to shape into a clearly identifiable institutional format and to meet the general conditions and references circulating on the projects' market. Becoming experts and recommending themselves as such is not an easy metamorphosis for these activists reluctant to bureaucracy and keen on sticking to a democratic non-hierarchical ethos. Some of them would even consider fundraising, institutional evaluations, professional management and accountability as completely strange and even humiliating constraints<sup>74</sup>.

When it grew, the network needed help from professionals in order to establish itself as a credible organization, as its early activist resources proven to be insufficient: exterior consultants and staff hired on particular management positions connected the first layer of experienced – but somehow "old-fashioned" - feminist activists with the democracy and human/women's rights promotion professional milieus. Recommended mainly by their managerial skills and less - or not necessarily - by their feminist commitment, such people could stop "working as feminists" a few years later. Their role has been to help soften the "cultural clash" between the Second Wave feminist activists and the international human rights professional promoters of the 1990s. Put in a situation of "learning by doing", NEWW managed to do the transition to a new age of feminist activism thanks to strong social resources of its founders, namely their connections with the US big philanthropy, the main education and research institutions, the professional associations of women's and gender studies.

<sup>72</sup>Personal interview with Ann Snitow, 2.10.2010. See also Snitow 1995 ; 2006.

<sup>73</sup>Personal interviews with Debra Schultz, Joanna Regulska, Ann Snitow.

<sup>74</sup> In Sonia Jaffe Robins's words : « *feeling like a child begging for money* » (personal interview, 3.10.2010).

Network's further evolution – moving to Eastern Europe, firm identification as an expertise provider and professional women's and human rights organization, strong involvement in huge regional projects – show that a corner was definitely and for ever turned: grassroots group handed over to the formal institution. Still, even after the time of genuine activism had ended, emotional links, friendships and common experiences have been keeping feeding both the organization's current activities and its institutional memory: “We all breath into each other's lives now”<sup>75</sup>.

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