

90 Year Greek League for Women's Rights
17 December 2010

Rosy Weiss, IAW Honorary President

Honourable guests, dear Alice, dear members of the League, dear friends,

At IAW's 29th Congress in Athens October 1992 on "Parity Democracy: The challenge of the 90s", Alice Marangopoulos, then the tenth IAW President (from 1989-1996) held one of her exciting speeches, for which she was and is famous. This one, addressing the International Alliance of Women was entitled "1902 to 1992, ninety years of struggle for gender equality".

Today, I have the honour and pleasure to pay tribute to the Greek League for Women's Rights, one of IAW's most prestigious member organisations, with your words, dear Alice, yet another time frame: The Greek League of Women's Rights, 1920 to 2010, ninety years of struggle for gender equality" In the name of the Alliance, I wish you a happy birthday, dear friends of the League, and many, many successful returns!

Ninety years: For the IWSA, in 1904, in Berlin, there were those who expressed their doubts on the viability of the Suffrage Alliance along the following lines:

"Its voice was too loud, its hair was too red, it was premature and was unlikely to survive."

But the suffragists prevailed and grew. As did your League!

Founded in 1920, the League almost immediately decided to join the Alliance the same year at its 8th Congress, held in Geneva – our first congress after WWI. The policy was clear from the very beginning: equality in all spheres of life, starting at that time by the acquisition of political rights, and especially the right to vote as the prime target. The importance given to that broader scope of activities (to which you also referred, Alice, in your 1992 speech) was underlined in 1926, by a change of name, when the International Woman Suffrage Alliance became the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship.

As a truly feminist organization, the League, from its very beginning, placed particular emphasis on the enjoyment of equal political rights, both in law and in practice. Support for quota systems was one of the strategies, I remember, education, yet another. The League was in the forefront of the campaign for free and legal abortion, the revision of family law for equal treatment of all children, whether born in or out of wedlock. During my all too rare visits to Athens and your headquarters I learned to appreciate your Centre of Documentation

and Study as well as your counselling and support services for women in need of free legal service and help in cases of violence. I do appreciate every single edition of your journal “Woman’s Struggle” that you graciously send to me, thus allowing a foreigner to follow your activities closely.

According to my notes, your founder, Avra Theodoropoulos served from 1923 to 1929 as the Alliance’s recording secretary and continued as Board member until 1935. In all books and papers in my possession and that I was able to consult over time I was not able to detect one single document or letter from Avra. Was this omission only due to translation difficulties? Yet, in 1958 she served as the president of IAW’s 18th Congress, the first held in Athens from August 25 to September 4th under the title “Yesterday – Today – Tomorrow”. According to Whittick’s “Women into Citizen”, with this theme, the Congress “sought to get an answer to the question why, with women having the vote in nearly all countries in the world, there are so few in public life and so few in parliament. The congress was directed to study the obstacles due to prejudice, and custom and to discuss means of overcoming them”. And I continue to quote Whittick: “The discussions of the theme of the Congress were led by Dr. Andrée Lehmann who spoke on “Yesterday, the Vote” followed by Dr. Maria Thanopoulous, President of the League who spoke of Today and of the regrettable maximum of only 10% of members of parliament being women, and Begum Anwar, who spoke of Tomorrow and the aims to secure that 50% of Members of Parliaments should be women..... I leave you to your own reflections on this point....

34 years later, at IAW’s second Congress held in Greece in 1992, the main topic was parity democracy. Athens, dedicated to the Goddess Athena, was indeed the right place to discuss a new (yet old) perception of Democracy, a democracy – and I quote from your speech, Alice – “which considers it a duty to take appropriate measures allowing all to enjoy real equality and real freedom”. And we all asked ourselves: Would that be the way to guarantee to women the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms? The answer was given 1993 in Vienna, at the UN Conference on Human Rights: Women’s Rights are Human Rights. And yet, did this really bring about the necessary change? In the meantime CEDAW was negotiated and ratified – not without reservations – by almost every government of the world. The UN Women’s Decade 1975-1985 was passing by, the Mexico City Plan of Action, the Copenhagen Programme of Action, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies and the Beijing Platform for Action have been negotiated and adopted, not to forget all these agreed

conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women, plus the agreements from Rio, Copenhagen, Nairobi, Rome and Istanbul, plus more recently the landmark resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council Reluctantly, I add the MDGs to this list. IAW's question remains the same: WHAT ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTATION?

But let me come back to 1992 and again and once more pay tribute to Alice Marangopoulos' clear vision of what is necessary to advance equality and empowerment. As early as 1992, in one of her brilliant interventions to the Commission on the Status of Women, at that time still in session in Vienna, Alice made three proposals.

- The establishment by the United Nations of a special fund similar to the one established for victims of torture in order to facilitate the establishment of shelters for women victims of domestic violence – a request fulfilled by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with the inception of the UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women as the only multilateral grant-making mechanism that supports local, national and regional efforts to end violence against women and girls
- the presence of non-governmental organisations on an equal footing with government representatives at the 4th international Women's Conference, Beijing, 1995 – the organization of the conference has taken a different direction, we all know that as it is part of our common herstory
- but most importantly: the inception of an international instrument similar to those already in existence in the realm of HR – convention or protocol to CEDAW – in order to guarantee the right of appeal for discriminations violating the provisions of CEDAW – the CEDAW optional protocol went into force on 22 December 2000. With this proposal, Alice Marangopoulos was the first to propose such a right of appeal.

The struggle continues.

In times of affluence as well as in times of economic turbulences. At our recent world congress, the 35th in line, Joanna Manganara, your representative to the IAW Board and IAW's main delegate to the European Women's Lobby has provided us with a very valuable answer to the present crisis. Redefine women as important economic agents, dismantle gender stereotypes, involve women at the decision making level in the design, implementation and evaluation of macroeconomic policies, and encourage equal representation of women and men in corporate and political positions of responsibility. In short, fulfil the full official name

of the “International Alliance of Women – Equal Rights, Equal Responsibilities”. As the new IAW representative to ILO and UNCTAD I promise to take this message with me to Geneva. The struggle continues.

While Alice, in her speech of 1992, developed on the most important resolutions of the Geneva Congress of 1920 let me bring to you the most recent resolutions of our vibrant Congress held last month in South Africa:

These encompass, among others:

- the harmonization of health norms with legal policies and regulations derived from international conventions, standards and decisions and not based on traditional and customary norms
- the inclusion of work directed towards the full implementation of Security Council Res. 1325 into the work program of UN Women, including initiatives to pressure governments to produce National Action Plans
- the respect by host countries of civil, political, economic and cultural rights of refugees fleeing from armed conflicts, and particularly women who are subjected to multiple discriminations
- the support to women’s organizations in the process of reconciliation for the so-called “comfort women” of the Asian-Pacific war
- the support for ongoing peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in order to put an end to the suffering in the region
- the call for the respect and reinforcement of economic, social and cultural rights in times of economic crisis.

Let me conclude this attempt to honour your pioneering work in the field of gender equality and the empowerment of women by quoting Alice’s presidential address to the 1996 IAW Congress: “I have worked passionately in fields that I considered interesting, just and useful for society. From the three such fields to which I dedicated my life – criminology, human rights and women’s rights – the one closest to my heart is the latter”. Dear Alice, except for criminology which I substituted with peace, I took this sentence as credo for my years as IAW President. And I really hope to have been able to live up to your standard.

Thank you for your attention.