

SOME OF THE NAW
MEMBERS AT THE
ANNUAL GENERAL
MEETING 2012



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN 50P SUMMER 2012

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isters

national assembly of women agm

ON the 28 April 2012 we gathered at Wortley Hall once again for our AGM. Our president Dona Feltham welcomed everyone and we went on to deal with the usual business after observing a minute's silence in honour of our late secretary Val Duncan. The financial report detailed by treasurer Eleanor Lewington was agreed and it was also agreed that Brian Clark would continue to audit our accounts. Pat Peters from the South Yorkshire Branch told us about their one day conference (see full report on page 5). We got updates from Barbara Switzer about the website, Eleanor about pensions, Janette Ferguson about *Sisters* and the Charter for Women Conference which we attended, Lorene Fabian about the Abortion Rights conference, the Women's TUC conference with comments from women delegates who had attended it, Anita Wright on the 60th Anniversary Working Group and Megan Dobney on the Sylvia Pankhurst campaign and the new updated edition of the NAW History, which brings us right up to 2012 our 60th year. Dona expressed her thanks to Norma Bramley for compiling and writing the last part to complement the first part written 12 years ago, and Megan for her typesetting of the publication. Copies are available on request.

abortion rights

Our first speaker was Darinka Aleksic, Abortion Rights co-ordinator who updated us on some of the things which are happening now and how they were affecting women. She reminded us that a woman's right to choose should be available to every woman and we should fight against the American groups from the "religious right" who are campaigning against choice. Unfortunately our government seems more interested in listening to them than in listening to our medical profession and to the women of the UK. She told us about a female rape victim who had been photographed outside a clinic and the violation that she felt and about the male who had been jailed for 2½ years for hacking into the Abortion Right's website after he disagreed with two female colleagues. Abortion Rights is not pushing women or girls into abortions and that 20% of doctors who are supposedly there to help and advise women are anti-choice. This was followed by a lengthy debate with comments from our delegates on personal experiences and issues. She also noted that in some rural areas of India female children are either aborted or killed after birth and that three doctors in the UK have been offering abortion for sexual selection.



trafficked women

Our next speaker was Sandy Broadhurst from RAPAC (a Refugees and Asylum Seekers organisation based in Manchester) who told us about the organisation she was with before introducing us to Mary Adenugba, a woman who was trafficked. Mary told us that when her mother, two sisters and daughter were killed in a bomb blast in Lagos her father and brothers said she must also die. A prominent man in her church offered to help her. When he brought her to London she thought she was safe. She was given a new name and passport and told she had to work as a prostitute, she had no choice, men were brought to her room every day, she felt trapped with nowhere to go. When she managed to escape she had to sleep rough but they always found her.

She was moved to Manchester by car and moved around the city entering and leaving buildings via car parks. There were several occasions when she was taken to police stations but the police never asked her what was happening to her or how she came to the UK, always speaking to her captors. She was given a lawyer but was too scared to tell her story. Eventually she was introduced to someone in RAPAC who supported her. An asylum claim was made for her – but was refused in February of this year. She said "I am not a criminal". The Poppy Project has credited Mary's story and yet she was still refused asylum. Mary should have been helped a lot sooner than she was. The campaign goes on to appeal against deportation, what will happen to Mary if she is forced to return to Lagos, to a father and brother who want her dead?

Trafficking is usually worse during wartime, poverty etc, but unfortunate-

NAW 60TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATORY DINNER AT WORTLEY HALL

LEFT TO RIGHT: ALICE MAHON, ANITA WRIGHT, MARGARET BOYLE, DONA FELTHAM, BARBARA SWITZER

ly there is a ready market in the UK. Our laws have been changed, the people who buy into trafficking are the criminals. We need to reappraise our laws. Tighten up red tape. Stop trafficking completely.

motions and officers

The motions put before AGM, debated and voted on were on Abortion Rights (agreed unanimously). Con/Dem cuts (agreed unanimously). Human Trafficking (agreed unanimously).

The following were elected as our officers: president Dona Feltham, secretary Anita Wright, treasurer Eleanor Lewington, vice-presidents Vera Baird QC, Rita Donaghy, Pat Hawkes, Helena Kennedy, Alice Mahon, Gloria Mills, Frances O'Grady, Margaret Prosser.

Ann Munsey announced that due to bumper sale of her knitwear, £122.50 would be given both to the NAW and the *Morning Star*.

Dona announced the launch of our Diamond Appeal with Eleanor reminding us that the NAW was set up as a group for peace and that we are affiliated to the WIDF. The NAW were refused charitable status because we campaign against war and for disarmament and we need to raise funds so that we can represent the women of the NAW at conferences both at home and abroad. We want to keep going for another 60 years.

We had a lovely dinner on Saturday evening where we celebrated our 60th anniversary and Diamond Appeal and also the 60th birthday of two of our delegates, a good time was had by all.

widf XV congress

international session

On Sunday morning it was time for our international session. The first part was a slide show (entitled *Comfort Women*) of prints by a Japanese woman called Hou Qiau Lan who as a 13 year old child, was the victim of sexual violence forced on her and other women and children by the Japanese Army in wartime and described how the victims felt. These prints were given as a gift by the women of Japan to the NAW at a meeting with the Japanese Women's Group Fudanren in London in November 2011. Barbara Switzer read the accompanying text on the prints during the show. It was very effective to show in that way and was appreciated by our AGM, our thanks to Barbara for making it possible. Hou Qiau Lan sadly has since died aged 73 years.

The case was publicised worldwide and made a great impact. An Assembly and Congresses in Europe and Asian countries as well as the United Nations said that "The Japanese government should apologise, compensate and educate their younger generation by telling them the truth". The Japanese government ignored this and their media would not take the issue up. The details of these *Comfort Women* disappeared from all text books of middle schools. Young teachers and students know nothing about them. But Japanese citizens are taking action now. Thirty Municipal Assemblies have successfully made pleas demanding that the government resolves the issue.

The second part was a short update from the 15th WIDF Congress in Brazil, which is held every four years. Janette, Dona and Barbara who attended both the Steering Committee and the Congress gave a short report and answered questions raised by the delegates, (see report on Congress right).

Our president Dona then closed the weekend with a reminder of our Diamond Anniversary Appeal in this our 60th year, we are a NGO (non-government organisation) and don't get any funds or grants from anywhere else so are reliant on membership fees, affiliations and donations for revenue. The NAW does a lot of work through campaigns, correspondence, conferences and meetings, there is a lot of work still to be done and we want to be around for the next 60 year to get it done. Dona then thanked everyone for coming, hoped that we will all bring someone else with us next year and have a safe journey home.

JANETTE FERGUSON
NAW EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBER

DONA FELTHAM, JANETTE FERGUSON AND BARBARA SWITZER REPRESENTED THE NAW AT THE XV CONGRESS OF THE WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION IN APRIL IN BRAZIL.
THIS IS JANETTE'S REPORT

ON the first two days we attended a Steering Committee to decide on the agenda and running order for the Congress. The Congress would last a further five days. Every country was invited to bring young women to take part in a separate meeting (presided over by Aili Libannino, Cuba) to discuss the women's issues from their perspective. They would give a report back to Congress and then join in the rest of the Congress.

On the first day of Congress we were welcomed to Brazil and Congress by the WIDF President Marcia Campos (not every country is involved in the steering committee), we spent the rest of the day in a plenary session where we discussed and decided on the Approval of Internal Rules, The Writing Committee, the Commission of Resolutions and Documents, the Final Declaration, the Electoral Committee, the Report of the Steering Committee, Presentation of the Financial and Statutes Reports, and List of Affiliates.

We then split into workshops to discuss the five themes (already agreed) of conference on which each country was invited to make a response about their own issues. A sixth theme was added by the Steering Committee. The themes were as follows: The capitalist crisis and its impact on women; Approaches to equality, development and peace for women; Approaches to ethnic, racial and cultural issues; Imperialist aggression and occupation and the challenges to world peace; Climate change and food security; The organic life of the WIDF. The workshops gave everyone who attended the chance to speak about their own country and its unique issues. A report from each workshop was then presented to Congress for further discussion and debate.

There was the opening of the third Festival of Nations and the second Book Fair, where all countries had a stall to display and sell goods from their own countries.

There was an opportunity for each region to show a DVD to give everyone an idea of what was happening in the countries within that region.

Dona Feltham (NAW President) read out a letter to Congress from Hetty Bower a long serving member of the NAW. The European Region had invited Hetty to Congress as our guest but sadly Hetty was unable to travel, so she wrote a letter sending her good wishes for the Congress and a message for all the sisters there. Marcia Campos (WIDF President) wrote out



TOP: THE NAW DELEGATION WITH THE EUROPEAN BANNER AT THE WOMEN'S MARCH FOR PEACE



ABOVE: AT THE EUROPEAN MEETING DURING WIDF CONGRESS. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JANETTE, DONA AND BARBARA WITH REGINA AND NATACHA FROM PORTUGAL

and signed a postcard which we brought back for Hetty thanking her for the good wishes she sent to the sisters and wishing her well.

The wife of one of the Cuban Miami 5 and the daughter of another attended and told us that one man had been released from jail but was still a prisoner under house arrest in America, with the other four still in jail. The fight to get them released and home again with their families continues. The women are travelling to London to be there between 18 and 24 June and wish to meet up with NAW officials.

We attended regional meetings which gave us the opportunity to meet up with women from the other European Countries there. We had women from Greece (Co-ordinators), Portugal (Finance), Cyprus (Vice President for Europe), Iceland, Italy, Russia, and Israel. That gave us the opportunity in a smaller forum to discuss our problems, aims, involvement in WIDF and also what our thoughts/stance was on different issues we would debate in the wider forum and try to get a form of words which would suit every country (not always easy or straightforward).

We all took part in a Women's March for Peace with banners, flags, t-shirts all showing our country and organisation. We were joined in the march by Brazilian Workers who were campaigning against cuts to jobs, services and the exceptionally high taxes they are being forced to pay (that sounds a bit familiar). We were all very

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acid survivors trust

REPORT BY SUSAN SCHONFIELD OF A TALK GIVEN BY TERRI KELLY, ADVISER TO ACID SURVIVORS TRUST INTERNATIONAL, AT THE APRIL BRANCH MEETING OF THE NAW WEST LONDON BRANCH

TERRI began by defining what was meant by acid attacks. These used to be prevalent in Britain and Northern Europe till the mid-nineteenth century, and were known as "vitriol attacks". They were associated with the underworld, and were stamped out by strengthening policing and an increased rule of law.

Acid attacks are the deliberate use of acid to attack another human being. They are usually perpetrated by men on women (80%), although there are some countries where women attack women (and men) and men attack men. These attacks are, globally, very much in the minority.

The most common and worst acid used is sulphuric acid, but nitric and hydrochloric acid are used as well. Acid burns are worse than thermal burns, as the acid eats into the layers of skin through to the bone and causes horrific damage. Acid results in terrible scarring, disfigurement, blindness or severely impaired sight. Specialist treatment is needed, and it is usually not available in the countries where acid attacks occur.

Forty per cent of attacks are on women under the age of 18. Children also get hurt, being near their mothers, often in bed at night, when attacked. It is a demonic, always pre-meditated, crime, which has been thought and planned out. In the vast majority, the women's faces are attacked; this, in the countries of occurrence, is a woman's chief asset in the marriage market; women are seen as disposable, and the acid is used to stigmatise them; no surgery can cover the effects.

ASTI is a single issue organisation, and a small one. It is the hub of a network of other organisation in developing countries. ASTI:

- assists them to build capacity, and sends out surgeons, specialist nurses, physiotherapists, and trains people on the ground
- works to increase awareness, for example with the UN, WHO; and tries to get the UN to put pressure on governments; this ties in with laws on domestic violence
- is a repository of knowledge, gathering information and evidence about this crime, as many attacks don't get on record, and many governments deny that they are happening. A professional researcher is badly needed by the organisation, which has no funds for this work.

The organisation started when Terri was posted by the UK's Department for International Development on her

first long-term overseas posting to work on education in developing countries, to Bangladesh in 1997. Her husband, John Morrison, went with her, intending to do academic research. They became aware of the crime, never having encountered it before, and fighting it has become their life's work. They are both unpaid, but now, 15 years on, ASTI has three full-time paid staff.

Initially they thought that the crime only occurred in Bangladesh and at first they sent women overseas for treatment. This was not sustainable, even though the main public hospital in Dhaka had only eight beds for burns patients for a population of 150 million. And burns treatment was only available for those who could pay.

John Morrison (chair and founder of ASTI) first established an NGO – The Acid Survivors Foundation, in Bangladesh. It took two years to set up, but by 1999 they had a building, staff and resources. At the same time John created a UK charity, aimed at getting resources and help from diaspora in the UK. They learnt that the crime occurred all over south Asia, and further afield, in more than 20 countries, and in every continent; that it was not associated with any particular religion, and could happen in Islamic, Buddhist, Christian and Hindu communities.

Realising that the UK operation had to be broadened, in 2004 the organisation was re-registered in the UK as ASTI. Five other organisations have now been set up – in Bangladesh, Uganda, Cambodia, Pakistan and Nepal. There have been difficulties in setting up an association in India.

In 2002 Terri was posted to Uganda, and John went with her, having received an OBE for his work in Bangladesh. By this time people began to come to John, to ask for his help, having heard of his achievements in Bangladesh. Terri and John did not leave the issue behind in Bangladesh. They began to hear of attacks in more and more countries and began to help countries establish NGOs dedicated to helping survivors and eliminating this crime. Each local organisation needs to be customised – for instance, in Cambodia the difference is that women sometimes perpetrate attacks on other women, again because of gender issues expressed as economic motivation, ie. spoiling someone's chances of marriage or fear of losing their husband and thus their income. Nepal is different again, in that there are more thermal burns than acid burns occurring, and some "suicides" which are not really so.

Some countries organise action against acid attacks through NGOs active in the women's movement;

ASTI has been recently approached by sister organisations in Malawi, Columbia and Nigeria. Sri Lanka and Afghanistan are also known to be places in need of organisation to help victims.

Raising awareness: a Channel 4 documentary *Saving Face* has been a huge hit in the US and Pakistan; it won an Oscar. It brings home the situation of what the victims have to live with. It is the first Oscar ever won by a Pakistani (a woman!) and the film has therefore been celebrated in Pakistan even though the topic has previously been denied. It has brought people knocking on the door of ASTI, which has been difficult for the organisation, as they were not set up to deal with individuals. The organisation has tried to set up a special fund to help with emergencies. The film in some ways reinforces the view that this crime only occurs in Islamic countries, and only in Pakistan. The surgeon shown as a hero is a Pakistani surgeon who works in the UK. However, ASTI uses other surgeons who have selflessly and nobly given their services completely free for many years. There is one surgeon, Ron Hiles, who is a trustee of ASTI and has treated over 2000 women – he and others are not mentioned in the film. However Terri feels that ASTI must use the opportunities the film has given to raise awareness.

The work of the partners on the ground covers four areas:

- medical and nursing services
- rehabilitation – not only physical, but psychological, social (dealing with the stigma, being abandoned by their families), and economic (offering training and education in livelihood opportunities)
- legal and advocacy work
- prevention – through campaigns, publicity using the moral outrage this crime arouses, working with governments to prevent through control of acid sales

Terri ended on a note of optimism, in that this is a crime that something can be done about. In Bangladesh when they started, the rate of (reported) attacks was around 500 a year – now it is less than 100.

Terri said in conclusion, whatever funding ASTI gets is used to help the network of organisations that have now been set up and to assemble information for advocacy.

There is a need for pro bono researchers on the profiles of perpetrators. Often they are poor rural people, both victims, and perpetrators; the latter are often protected by the community – a 'Mafia' sort of organisation will protect them.

The group renewed their thanks, and Terri was presented with a donation of £100.

witches to parliament

PAT PETERS, FROM THE NAW'S NORTH YORKSHIRE BRANCH, REPORTS ON THEIR RECENT CONFERENCE

ON a sunny Saturday in March a group of women met together at Wortley Hall to celebrate International Women's Day. They came from around the UK (although mainly from Yorkshire) and various backgrounds. So why had so many women made the effort to get to Wortley Hall? The answer is simple, to attend a conference on Women, Power and Politics organised by the South Yorkshire branch of the National Assembly of Women alongside the Sheffield branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). NAW had been fortunate to obtain sponsorship from the Sheffield No.1 branch of Unite for the conference.

The first session led by Ann Munsey and Pat Peters was based on the role and persecution of witches throughout history. They managed to show witches in a positive light as the healers of the peasant classes. The lore of these women was passed from mother to daughter and benefited everyone in the community. So why were witches (who were mainly women) persecuted? The Church and State did not approve of women acting as untrained medical staff (that is they had not been to university to train as a doctor – women were barred from further education) and so began the Inquisition. This was the start of the witch hunts throughout Europe which resulted in over nine million women being accused and put to death as witches. Many of the accused were old, vulnerable women whom their neighbours had taken a dislike to. Many faced torture before being put to death.

Witches have been part of literature for centuries. They can be found in fairy tales, as well as classical and modern literature. Literature showed that there are both good and bad witches.

Although this was meant to be a fun start to the day, the session brought serious discussion exploring how women are still being called witches, how many women have been accused of 'bewitching' men?

The second session saw Angela Smith, the local MP, talking about the influences in her life and the difficulties of juggling family life with being a Parliamentarian. Angela informed us that her mother was a major influence; she taught her where her political allegiance lay. She received encouragement from various women to pursue a career in local politics from women such as Joan Barton. Joan refused to let women be side-lined. Angela regarded her as an outstanding role-model for women; Joan was never aggressive or over-assertive.

Angela told us that the major impact of being an MP is on the family. MPs do not see their families as often as they would like, this can be especially difficult for women with small children. Women feel guilty for leaving their families for three or four days a week when Parliament is in session. The domestic side of life has to be fitted alongside all the responsibilities of being a MP. There is some good news; women MPs continue to break boundaries and creating opportunities for future generations.

All women short lists are required to support women; lots of voters still believe that men make better MPs. Parliament is still very macho and aggressive; it has class and gender issues that are still to be resolved. Angela told us that there is a real need for more MPs from a working class background to redress the issues resulting from those who have attended public school, think about the current Cabinet. Grass roots politics is being weakened with the continual selection of the elite, those who have political careers.

An excellent buffet lunch in the main dining room gave women the chance to relax and network before the afternoon session.

Megan Dobney from SERTUC (and NAW) talked about the role of women in the trade union movement. Megan gave us a brief history of women in the TU movement; in 1875 the first trade union league was set up for all working women, many were from the textile industries. We have to remember that women were employed on much lower wages than men. By 1914, 90% of working men were members of a trade union, whereas 90% of working women were still unorganised. By 2012, 48% of trade union membership is women, yet less than 30% of all workers are in a trade union. Megan provided us with further statistics; only 14 of the 50+ trade unions are led by women. Unions require leaders who have empathy with women, who have an understanding of what it is to be a woman, to be a mother. Megan ended by saying that trade unions must continue to inspire girls and young women to improve their lot and to continue educating men. The RMT has an excellent education programme for young members on the history of the trade union movement including the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Burston School Strike and the Durham Miners' Gala.

Martha Jean Baker, a US lawyer and a vice president of WILPF, talked about the European Union Women's Lobby Group. Martha Jean informed us that she had been raised in a left-wing family in the US. She has represented WILPF on the EU Women's Lobby Group since 2002. The EU Women's

Lobby Group is part of the Board and has staff in Brussels and is funded by the EU and other organisations. Martha Jean reminded us that lots of legislation in the UK is determined by the EU. The Group campaigns on various issues; gender equality, exploitation in advertising, equal pay goals, migrant workers to name just a few. Although there are "ladies who lunch" and those who are "there for the gong" others work hard to raise women's concerns with MEPs and the Commission. A current campaign, *You Get What You Pay For* compares arms spending with spending on social welfare, which impacts on women in particular. The EU Women's Lobby Group is also pushing the 50:50 campaign to get equal representation for women on public bodies. She reminded us that there is still a gender pay gap – women have to work till 5 March to get the same pay as men for the previous year always behind in pay. The Group ensure that their concerns are followed up with the required actions.

In addition, Martha Jean spoke briefly about UN Security Resolution 1325, the ground breaking resolution which for the first time recognises the vital role women can play in conflict resolution and peace keeping.

The final speaker was Linda McAvan, MEP for Yorkshire and Humberside, who talked about the work of the European Parliament and Council of Ministers. She talked about the positive EU laws which benefit women in particular – on equal pay in principle, the Working Time Directive; giving workers one day off a week and four weeks' paid annual leave, securing equal rights for agency workers who have worked 12 weeks or over as other workers. The EU sets out the minimum rights of workers, although individual governments can improve on these rights. Linda informed us that Treaties state what the EU can and cannot do. If EU ministers wish to venture into a new area (ie. foreign affairs) then there has to be a new Treaty approved by all member states. Linda mentioned a couple of Treaties which gave the EU more powers: the Treaty of Amsterdam which allows for cross-border crime control and the Treaty of Lisbon which gave MEPs powers regarding trade agreements.

The EU Commission is made up of selected commissioners and civil servants whose job it is to create laws but not to approve them. It is the role of the European Parliament to discuss and approve these laws.

From comments received the day had been enjoyable, informative, thought-provoking and fun; which was the aim of the organisers. Many asked for this to be a yearly event. Many women stayed at the end for refreshments and a chat before setting off for home. I'm sure that the organisers left feeling satisfied that the day had gone well and as usual Wortley Hall proved to be an ideal venue.

celebrating **hetty bower**

I met Hetty Bower earlier this year to talk about her life with a view to writing an article in *sisters*. She is 106 years old, a lifelong anti-war activist and learned from her older sister, a suffragette, about the fight for votes for women. She was born in Dalston in 1905 of a traditional Jewish family; she has two daughters, two grandsons and two great grandsons.

She met her husband-to-be during the General Strike of 1926 and their romance began when she knocked on his door to collect his Labour Party subscription. They campaigned together for the next 74 years and Hetty has not stopped since. On demonstrations her only complaint is that they walk too slowly.

In 1934 British fascists were becoming more aggressive and Hetty became concerned for her parents as personal attacks on older individual Jews had started. In Austria, the anti-socialist Dolfuss uprising began and some members of the ILP were calling for active intervention. The *Daily Worker* was protesting and calling for demonstrations against the fascist menace and brutality.

By 1935 the divisions in the ILP had reached a crisis, the fascist attack on Abyssinia being the catalyst. A Revolutionary Policy Committee was formed which Hetty and Reg joined. A special ILP conference was called and a motion opposing the Committee's ideas (supported by the leadership) was carried. Hetty, Reg and a large group resigned and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain where they remained until the divisions in the CPGB in the mid-80s.

In an interview on Channel 4 with Jon Snow on 11 November last year Hetty asked "What sane person could be pro-war?" and said "As long as my legs can take me, I will be participating in anti-war activity". When asked what Remembrance Sunday meant to her she replied: "The futility of War. The waste. The money spent on arms research".

Just over a week before the Women of the Year Lunch Hetty received huge cheers when she addressed the anti-war rally in Trafalgar Square. She said "I am in my cosy warm room preparing for sleep, suddenly the scene changes, I am back in 1914, nearly nine years old, I hear my father say 'so we are at war - this is where the lies begin' and begin they did. We learned that the Germans were cutting off the hands of children in Belgium - the lies have changed. May peace in the world prevail."

The poor turnout in the local elections as well as the re-election of Boris Johnson dismayed her. A feature in *The Times* (Hetty is no fan of Rupert Murdoch) told of a discussion to per-



suade a 27 year Oxford graduate to cast her first vote, Hetty said that it shocked her that any young woman can say that she is not interested in voting and asked that they consider what women such as Emily Davidson went through. She told of how she grew up with her eldest sister discussing how she thought women should be treated as citizens, just like men, of how her sister had to attend suffrage meetings without her father finding out. Hetty said if you had lived at that time, you would know what a precious thing democracy is. It is far from perfect but it is an example to the world. You can't just vote based on your own life. You need to be aware of the society in which we live and how other people live... don't forget that fascists are still alive and well. It is up to those who are able to vote for those who stand up against them. Voting is the only way to get legislation to make Britain the civilised country it ought to be.

This is only a thumbnail sketch of Hetty Bower. But Dona was so inspired by her when asked, at the WIDF in Lisbon at the preparatory meeting for the Congress, to nominate a special woman who should receive an invitation to the Congress; she nominated Hetty and explained why. Hetty duly received her invitation; Dona gave a brief introduction and read Hetty's reply to the Congress: "I send warmest greetings to the Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation in Brazil. Thank you for the honour of the invitation to attend but at 106 years old I no longer travel. I call on the Congress to strengthen the international ties between women everywhere to achieve peace in our war-torn world". In reply a card signed by the President, Marcia Campos, was sent expressing thanks for her warm greetings and very timely, inspirational message.

A truly remarkable and inspirational woman.

BY BARBARA SWITZER

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glad to be able to show our support for the workers' march and campaign.

We had elections for the President and Vice Presidents and a motion was put before Congress that the existing system of one President and four Vice President was very unfair and unequal to the continent or region which held the presidency. As in any organisation she could not be impartial as president and also fully represent the countries within the region she is from, and as the current President had already served a full four year term (and no one else had stood for president) we had several decisions to make. After a long and sometimes heated debate it was decided because of extraordinary circumstances that the current President (if she was voted in) could accept one more four year term in office. It was also decided that it was unfair there were only four Vice Presidents when there were five regions/continents, and that there should now be five Vice Presidents, but the fifth Vice President would not be from the same country as the President. The electoral committee which included NAW President Dona Feltham (had already met the day before to decide how elections would be run and who would do what), then presided over the voting process.

The elections which we were hoping would be fairly straightforward took a lot longer than we thought, because there were so many countries and so many interpretations of what was required, but eventually we got there. The results were as follows:

President Marcia Campos

Vice Presidents

Asian Countries Anna Raja

European Countries Skevi Koukoumas

Arab Countries Mayada Abassi

African Countries Elizabeth Tortosa

American Countries Luzia Ingles.

We were entertained by different groups of singers, dancers and entertainers during our lunchtime and dinnertime each day, we also had an evening concert of solidarity where we were entertained by an excellent and well known Brazilian band led by a female singer who is also a member of the Brazilian Parliament. This gave us a chance to experience some of the culture of Brazil and we were also taken on a tour of Brazilia which is a very modern city with stunning architecture, apparently it has been custom built as the administrative capital of Brazil. The Brazilian people, particularly the women were very welcoming and friendly, as were all the women of the other countries. It was a great opportunity to build bridges, to build friendships and to build links with the women of the world.

abortion rights agm

THIS year Abortion Rights' March Conference was held at Unite's head office in London and was attended by Anita Wright, Dona Feltham (who also sits on the Abortion Rights EC) and Janette Ferguson, on behalf of the NAW. The chair this year was Ann Henderson.

The conference was well attended and its always heartening to see new faces every year.

In the morning we started off by having a debate on the cut to public spending by this ConDem government and the way it is affecting major services in the UK. Any cuts to the NHS can and do have an effect on the availability of abortions for women but also have an effect on the provision of counselling and after-care services too. Funding to other organisations outside of the NHS and changing the providers of services are also contributing factors.

We talked about the importance of the involvement of young women/girls in Abortion Rights and that access to education, information and support will always be available to everyone who needs it.

We also discussed in some length another danger to "our right to choose" and that is the influence religious groups, some from the UK but mainly from America, are having on this ConDem government, who it would seem would much rather listen to and put their misguided views before our own professionals, the doctors, nurses and counsellors of the National Health Service and more importantly to the women of this country. At the moment there is still a majority support for a woman's right to choose but we must be vigilant, we must be ready to fight to stop this regression back to the 30s and 40s when women were dying because the only option available to them was the back street abortionists. Speak to your local counsellors, make sure they support any campaign or vote for the retention and strengthening of this vital service and to fight against the anti-choice groups.

Another issue discussed was the misinformation being publicised in English newspapers, ie. reporters recording doctors and nurses in abortion clinics and the misinformation in the advice and education being given in our schools today, how can our children and young women make the right choices if they have the wrong information?

Baroness Joyce Gould, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Sexual and Reproductive Health Group was our first speaker, she told us that the Health and Social Care Bill has been taken from the Local Authorities and is now the responsibility of the National



Communities Board because abortion is a medical procedure. This could possibly be better in the long run. She also talked about her concerns with the Christian Right Movement and their influence on government policy, they have 16 to 18 representatives dealing with the UK government.

The Sexual Health Forum movement started when a need was recognised for abortion rights views to be heard. Activities are being better co-ordinated after one meeting had only one pro choice and five anti-choice, our voice must be heard. There is still a lot of work to be done, but she is a strong supporter and recognises the need for vigilance while this process is ongoing. She also told conference that the Scottish government are more than happy with their current arrangements.

Dr Peter Jackson former Labour MP and 1967 abortion rights campaigner was our second speaker. He told us that the reason he joined the campaign was because it was his view (both then and now) that the need for safe abortions and the right to choose was not only a woman's issue but a woman's right and that more men, MPs and Councillors and teachers should be educated in the dangers of back street abortionists. He then went on to tell us about the pro-choice campaign and the successes and the pitfalls they experienced.

Anne Marie Waters, from the National Secular Society, was our third speaker, she told the conference about the group she represents and their opposition to the Christian Rights Movement in the UK and the USA. She detailed some of the areas where they have affected women's rights with the

comments, "pregnancy following rape is a gift from god" and "women should make the best of a bad situation" and they also provide monetary support to anyone who will further their cause, ie. candidates against President Obama after he stated "free abortion would be available to all women". The Catholic Church is aggressively opposed to Obama's plan and in Ireland it is taught in schools that women are murderers if they terminate a pregnancy. Religion should not be allowed to sit on any committee or commission making these decisions. Spain is apparently going down the same road.

The following motions were put before conference: Motion A: Changes to Abortion Counselling, was agreed unanimously. Motion B: Health & Social Care Bill 2010-2012, was agreed unanimously. Motion C: Religious involvement in anti-choice activism, was agreed with six voting against because of some concerns about the wording. Motion D: Abortion Services and a judicial review, was agreed unanimously.

Ann closed the Conference by thanking everyone for taking part in lengthy debates and reminding us that since Abortion Rights don't receive any grants from anywhere they have to raise their own funds where they can, this is vital because of the amount of work with campaigns to counter-balance the Religious Rights Groups and their supporters, we also discussed suggestions and ideas made to add to what is already being done, so that the fight can continue to ensure that we will always have "our right to choose".

JANETTE FERGUSON, NAW EC MEMBER

our history and future

THE many campaigns fought by the NAW include equal pay, the national minimum wage, childcare, pensions, the environment and a woman's right to choose, its success leading to one of the most liberating pieces of legislation for women, David Steele's 1967 Abortion Act.

We have produced policy papers and campaigned on Equality at Work, Domestic Violence, Young People & Social Exclusion, and the End of Child Poverty. Some three million children still live in poverty in the UK, one of the worst rates in Europe, with all the consequences this has for educational achievement and life chances.

Another area of campaigning for the NAW has been the Charter for Women after its inauguration in 2005. The Charter was updated in 2008 in light of the erosion of women's rights, the continuing gender pay gap and pensioner poverty. It also included specific reference to violence against women and against oppression of lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women.

The NAW has campaigned consistently on changes to our pensions system, specifically on the question of women's pensions with a briefing paper in 2002 and formally launched at a meeting in the House of Commons. The NAW's demands include – a basic fair universal state pension linked to average earnings, no means testing, no increase in state pension age and the abolition of higher rate tax relief which only benefits the higher paid (this would bring extra revenue for basic pensions).

The main thread of the NAW has always been – the fight for peace. As in its early history the NAW has been working and campaigning both internationally and nationally against the evils of war. On 15 February 2003, a huge and historic demonstration of more than two million people took place in London. Despite this and without the backing of the United Nations, the United States, supported by the New Labour government of Tony Blair launched an illegal occupation of that country. The NAW position was very clear – it was totally opposed to the war. Once again war and intervention has seen massive destruction and loss of life and women's rights have been seriously curtailed. At home an important part of the fight for peace and against nuclear weapons has been women's camps at Greenham Common and Menwith Hill.

The NAW also became a founding sponsor of the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee, planning to erect a statue to Sylvia in June 2003 on College Green opposite the Palace of Westminster. Sadly to date the cam-

paign has been unable to secure a site, with the House of Lords being the stumbling block, but the campaign goes on.

The work of the NAW continued with the Hope not Hate campaign to expose and fight against BNP activity, children's rights, especially as the result of deregulation in the globalised market, HIV/Aids issues, job cuts, benefit cuts, pension cuts, increase in pensionable age, continuing conflicts at home and abroad, child poverty, the threat to equality and women's rights, a woman's right to choose and the right of everyone to a living wage.

Women's struggle for changes in society have brought about a respect of women's rights, and confirm the need for a strong and powerful women's movement, without which little would have been won in the past nor will much be won in the future.

The NAW has a proud history. We celebrate our 60th year in 2012 and look forward to a continuing contribution to the strengthening of a united women's movement, for we know that our aims can only be achieved through women becoming a united, progressive force and we are confident that we can reach this goal under the umbrella of the NAW. We urge all women to join the NAW. Our journal is *sisters* (Sisters In Solidarity To End Racism and Sexism) produced four times a year. Our website can be accessed at www.sisters.org.uk.

The message of the NAW 60 years on is the same today as it was on 8 March 1952.

- For life not death
- For peace not war
- For the future of our children

The above article is taken from the updated NAW History. Copies are available from naw@sisters.org.uk

our diamond appeal

THE National Assembly of Women is celebrating its 60th year in 2012. The first meeting of the NAW took place on 8 May 1952. Since then it has been in the forefront of the fight for women's rights and equality. It is affiliated to the WIDF so meets up with women of most countries in the world and is also affiliated to a number of UK organisations (see www.sisters.org.uk).

We do not receive grants from anywhere, so rely on membership and affiliation fees, and donations.

We have seen many changes over the last 60 years, some good but some very bad, and there is a lot of work still to be done. The NAW does make a difference, we want to be around for the next 60 years. Please give us your support to enable us to continue the fight.

Please send donations (cheques payable to NAW) to our treasurer Eleanor Lewington at the address below.

south yorkshire festival

THE South Yorkshire Festival will be held again this year at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield on Saturday 7 July. The theme this year will be our Diamond Anniversary and the keynote speakers will all be women.

There will be entertainment, food, bar and of course numerous stalls. The NAW will have our usual stall giving you the chance to do a bit of shopping and bargain hunting too, so come along and support the NAW and Wortley Hall.

All welcome!

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £15 for the annual subscription (£5 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is: £15 (local organisation/NAW branch), £30 (regional organisation), £45 (national)

Name _____

Address _____

postcode _____

Organisation _____

phone _____

email _____

Send to: NAW, 1 Lee Close, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 0DW