

## **A brief and personal history of EWM**

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It may seem a bit premature to be writing the history of an organisation that is only five years old, but we have come so far in that time, that it may be of interest to put something on record. I hope I may be forgiven for telling the story from a rather personal viewpoint, for that is after all, how I have seen it.

The Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM) has now been in existence for some 20 years. I was involved a bit in its embryonic form, Boston Women in Mathematics, when I was a graduate student at Harvard. I think that is where I first started thinking about how I felt as a woman in a male world, and realised with surprise how nice it was to find myself in a room full of women mathematicians where I could positively feel the warmth. The friendships we women at Harvard made as a result of that group helped me, for one, feel much more comfortable for the rest of my time in graduate school.

Under the aegis of Alice Schafer, the Boston group grew into the impressive organisation that we now know as AWM. Among its many activities, A.W.M. has been organising events at big mathematics meetings, and thus it was at the International Congress in Berkeley in 1986, that EWM was born. A number of women from across the world, myself included, were invited to report on the position of women mathematicians in their countries. Knowing as I did a number of the organisers, I found myself attending an AWM committee meeting before the panel. It was so inspiring to be seated round a big table with twenty or so active and committed women mathematicians that I found myself thinking that this is something rather special, why shouldn't we do something like this in Europe too? The idea must have been in the air, for when later five of us Europeans met at the panel, I don't believe it was me who voiced the idea that we should try to set up our own version of AWM. We discussed the idea in hurried snatches throughout the AWM party that evening and grabbed a lunch together sometime, and by the end of the Congress had decided that we would meet again in Paris in December and see what we could do.

At the time of the Congress there was the great concern in France about the merging of the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles with the corresponding school, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, for men. For many years the school had fostered a strong and successful tradition among French women mathematicians. Entry to the Ecole Normale is through a very highly competitive exam, and it was well known that women underperformed on that exam to the extent that if entry was combined, the numbers of women would drop catastrophically. It was also well known that after a year or so the women had caught up. Somehow factors in the circumstances of the exam were mitigating against women. This question continued to be of great concern in France, and thus our choice to meet in Paris augured well.

It was with some trepidation that I approached the Institut Henri Poincaré on Rue d'Ulm in which the meeting was to take place. Of course I expected to meet some of the French group, but it seemed a minor miracle to find not only all but one of the Berkeley people, but others, from Sweden for example, who had somehow heard about us and had been excited enough by the idea to take a chance on it and come. Of course there was a lot of discussion of the French problems (as predicted, the drop in women's entry to the Ecole Normale had been and continues to be catastrophic). We had maths talks and we tried to discuss organisation. I had a flash of sympathy for the people in Brussels struggling to foster cooperation between nations, not only each with its own language, but with its own ideas about organisation, and even its own philosophy of what the important issues were anyway. I came away with a mixture of despair at the confusion and exhilaration that not only

did we have the beginnings of a network, but that we were going to meet again and that Bodil Branner had offered to organise the next gathering in Copenhagen in a year's time.

As the Copenhagen meeting approached, we were still doing things pretty much in the dark, with very little idea how many people would come or if it would be possible to get any funding. Up until September it seemed as if nothing might happen at all. But then suddenly a lot of people started to get interested, and Bodil got some money from the Danish government, and twenty two of us from nine countries (including Anna Romanowska coming all the way from Warsaw) found ourselves gathered on the appointed date Bodil's university, the Technical Institute in Lyngby.

I doubt if any of us who were there will forget the warmth of that meeting, the feeling that we really were an organisation in embryo, and that, somehow, we were spreading! We realised, very late in the day, but fortunately just in time, that we needed a bit more organisation than we had had in Paris, and drew up for the first time the EWM information page and constitution, so that we should have something to pass on after the meeting. We had reports from the countries represented, and we had some mathematics. As an outcome of the discussions in France about the "Grandes Ecoles" and a number of other concerns, the French had formed "*femmes et mathématique*", and already had about 100 members and had organised meetings and actions to promote women at secondary school level. As to mathematics, all of us who heard it remember Ragni Piene's beautiful talk on Algebraic Geometry in which she managed to carry us along so that we all relaxed and asked questions and actually knew we really understood. It felt more like sitting in a room talking to friends than listening to a seminar. We took it as a model, and decided that on future occasions we should try for more of the same. Shared meals were an important part of Copenhagen too. Simple but lovely meals of Danish fish and pastries in the sunny maths common room with flowers on the tables, and then a memorable meal prepared for us by Bodil's husband and son in their home. It all brought us closer together as we shared our experiences of life and work.

Coming away from that meeting, I felt that for the first time I understood something of the vision of the founders of the European community. Differences of culture and language yes, that was part of the richness of it, and yet it was true, there really is a common European identity. In Paris we had struggled and now we were really forging a common bond.

By the time the next meeting in Warwick, in December 1988, we had the benefit of a bit of planning experience and thought we had got it organised. I had offered to take it on, knowing that I should have the help of the Warwick Women in Maths which we had started in the interim, and we also had the benefit of the Copenhagen experience. Nevertheless, we once again underestimated how big a job we had taken on. This time 43 of us gathered and between us we represented 13 European countries with 'guests' from as far afield as Brazil and the Côte d'Ivoire. Much to our surprise, we had generous funding from the Women's Policy Division of the EEC, and together with help from the London Mathematical Society, that allowed us to plan a 3 day meeting and cover the expenses of everyone who did not get help from their own country. We had a more ambitious three day programme which included an afternoon of talks and discussions for 100 girls from local schools, and a day devoted to mathematics. Afterwards we all said that we wished that there had been more of this, though we didn't know when there would have been time. One of our speakers was Vera Trnkova from Prague: we were reaching out (remember there was still an iron curtain) and it was wonderful to make this contact with 'the other side'. We spent a fair bit of time hammering out ideas for our organisation and our constitution. There were other ideas in the air as well and it was after that meeting that Laura Tedeschini started our email network and Capi Corrales made a directory of women mathematicians in Europe.

It was at Warwick that we first started really talking about culture differences, trying to understand how they dramatically affect the numbers and status of professional women. Already in Copenhagen when we collected reports from all the countries represented we had been struck by the enormous differences in numbers of women mathematicians across Europe. Roughly, it went from north to south: the further south, the more women. The most by far were in Italy, Spain and Portugal.

The least represented seemed to be Germany. Not what one might naively expect, and least with 'northern' spectacles. In Warwick, Maria Losada (from Argentina) and I presented a paper in which we explored some possible deeper causes of differences in attitude: different perceptions of women in Catholic versus non-Catholic countries, and, further afield, the influence of matriarchal traditions in tribal societies in Latin America. All this generated some very lively discussion, not exactly about mathematics, it is true, but things which perhaps we need to begin to understand if we are to try to sort out our proper place in the world as professional women.

One of the things we did not get right in Warwick was to understand the importance of having a group responsible for carrying forward EWM until we next met. Raquel Reis took on the job of organising the next meeting in Lisbon, but not long after Warwick our international coordinator had to resign and somehow there was none in place to make sure that things continued to function and that information got sent around. The result was that the Lisbon meeting was first postponed and then happened at very short notice, so that in the event only a handful of people went. I am told that those who were there had a good time. I am sorry the rest of us missed it; at least we have tried to learn the lessons of this experience.

For while after that some of us were worried that EWM might disappear altogether. Fortunately *femmes et Mathématiques* came to the rescue. In Warwick we had talked about a week long meeting in Luminy, as suggested by Michèle Audin and they, especially Eva Bayer, began a lot of hard work which got everything rolling again, and got the provisional promise of a very large amount of funding from the EEC. They planned an ambitious programme (we actually had a committee meeting 6 months in advance of the meeting itself!). One idea was to carry forward our idea of exploring different models of giving seminars to make them more "user friendly". We went to the lengths of getting the talks vetted in advance by "idiots", and I am told that some of the idiots asked for a lot of changes in the talks! At any rate, by the time we got to the meeting, I think many of us felt that we had had some very good talks where we really had learned a lot. We even planted idiots in the audience who had instructions to ask any dumb question they wanted. I enjoyed being an idiot, and recommend it!

One of the conditions of the EEC money was that we should do some work on role models. We decided to invite a psychologist, Claudine Laville to help us in this regard. She did (and is continuing to do) a lot of work on this for us and led us in discussion at Luminy. We also planned time to do some more personal sharing of our own experiences. It was dear that to avoid a repetition of the Lisbon experience, and to cope with our growing numbers, we needed to do a lot of work on our organisation, and set aside what we thought was a generous amount of time for this.

I needn't say much about the actuality of the Luminy meeting as this is the subject of many other articles here. Despite uncertainty about funding (the EEC only made its final decision in our favour a month *after* the meeting had taken place), over 50 of us made it. *femmes et Mathématiques* did a wonderful job in scraping together money from here there and everywhere (including the city of Marseille, which also invited us to a reception in the Mairie). For the first time we had a sizeable group of Germans and before the week was up they had formed themselves into a national group. Many contacts had been made: I think we had representatives from all the former Eastern block countries except, sadly, Yugoslavia and Romania. History was being made as we met. I remember Polyna Agranova introducing herself on the first evening with: 'I really don't know what is my country, but I come from Kharkov in Ukraine'. Well, by the end of the meeting it was Ukraine. We learnt a bit more about Europe from that and rewrote all our documents so that we now have a network of regional not national coordinators.

So what of the future? Our organisation is growing and we are sorting out how to organise ourselves. By the next time around we hope to be on the way to a proper legal structure, membership lists and all that. We took steps to ensure continuity so that all our coordinators will not disappear again and we all know who is supposed to be doing what. We are more than pleased that Anna Romanowska's group is organising the next meeting for Warsaw in June 1993. From then on

we hope to arrange EWM meetings every other year, to fit in between the International and European congresses. The EMS has set up a committee on "Women and mathematics", chaired by Eva Bayer, which, with the help of many of the individual European Mathematical Societies, has collected much more detailed statistics about numbers of women mathematicians across Europe in preparation for the round table on Women and Mathematics at the first European Congress in Paris. (I am secretly rather proud that EWM got there first and existed before the official start of EMS.) We are beginning to collect biographical information about women mathematicians, we are thinking about regional meetings, and there are a lot more ideas being tossed around that have yet to come to fruition. Above all we are making a reality out of the Berkeley vision: we have a network not only of contacts but of warm friendships right across Europe and beyond. In bringing together our ideas and our problems we have discovered a sense of identity that we did not know we possessed. We have shared more than our mathematics; we have shared our songs and our dreams.