

**Report on the Bangalore Congress of the Third World Organization  
of Women in Science (TWOWS)**

by Ann Hibner Koblitz

Over 300 participants from more than forty countries came to Bangalore, India, for the Third International Congress of TWOWS on 21–25 November 2005. Talks and poster sessions were devoted to topics ranging from women's educational opportunities to rural women's appropriate technology groups to technical developments in mathematics or gene therapy. Plenary sessions included a fascinating symposium on Indian women in science and addresses by Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn of Thailand (herself a Ph.D./M.D. researcher who studies medicinal plants) and by several Indian dignitaries, including His Excellency Dr. Abdul Kalam, President of India. There were also keynote talks on each of the four main subject areas: Science and Technology Education for All (Ann Hibner Koblitz); Health, A Continuing Challenge for Women (Mayana Zatz, Brazil); Environmentally Sustainable Development (Mayra de la Torre, Mexico); and Women and New Technologies (M. S. Shaila, India). The Indian Ministry of Science and Technology, the Jawaharlal Nehru Center, and other sponsors did an excellent job of coordinating the event.

As is usual in large international meetings of this type, a number of viewpoints on issues of women and science were represented. Some speakers claimed never to have experienced gender discrimination, and chose to speak only of their narrow specialty. Some others, although they discussed such social questions as unequal access to resources, appeared to believe that this type of problem would disappear on its own with the further advance of science and technology. On the other hand, several of the speakers stressed that a comprehensive gender analysis is necessary, and that it is impossible to divorce questions of women's participation in science, technology and medicine in the Third World from broader issues of structural adjustment, globalization, and feminization of poverty.

There was occasionally tension between the adherents of the various viewpoints. Some of those who saw the need for sophisticated analyses of gender along with other socioeconomic and political factors were bothered by what they felt was naiveté on the part of some of the speakers. They suggested that future meetings should provide opportunities for interaction with social scientists and humanists, and wanted gender to be explicitly acknowledged as a category for analysis. Other participants vociferously disagreed. For example, Dr. Mohammed Hassan, Executive Director of the Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), maintained that TWOWS should showcase the work of women scientists; he viewed talk of gender as an inappropriate diversion. Dr. Shobhana Narasimhan retorted that unless TWOWS paid attention to gender issues, in ten years' time there might not be any women scientists to showcase. (Indeed, Dr. Hassan himself confirmed that the percentage of women in TWAS is continuing to decline from its high of 15% in 1988.)

To me perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the conference concerned the election to replace Prof. Lydia Makhubu of Swaziland, who has ably led TWOWS since her election in 1993. The candidates were Dr. Lilliam Alvarez of Cuba and Dr. Kaiser Jamil of India.

In the course of several conversations over meals, I became aware that Dr. Alvarez was unlikely to win because many participants from Asia and Africa were under the influence of U.S. anti-Cuban propaganda. People told me that Fidel Castro is a “terrorist,” and that they would be “afraid” to go to Cuba for a conference.

I was appalled. How could they be so ignorant of the facts? In reality, the vast majority of countries of the world, including most of Europe, have normal, friendly relations with Cuba. Just two weeks before the conference, the United Nations had voted 182 to 4 to condemn the U.S. embargo against Cuba. Moreover, visitors to Cuba can benefit from learning about Cuba’s systems of education, medicine, and scientific research. And Cuba is the favorite vacation destination for working-class tourists from Canada during the winter months! But a surprising number of otherwise well-educated people have bought into the U.S. government line on Cuba.

After the election was completed but before results were announced, the Vice-Presidents from the four TWOWS regions were to give their reports. The Vice-Presidents from Africa and the Arab region failed to appear or send reports, and the Asia Vice-President, Dr. Jamil, talked only about a couple of initiatives in her own country in which she was directly involved and seemed to know nothing about activities elsewhere in her region (even in India). Then Dr. Alvarez gave her report. She described TWOWS activities in Argentina, Bolivia (where the TWOWS-affiliated women-in-science association, headed by Elsa Quiroga, has branches in six cities), Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, and, of course, Cuba. The range of activities was impressive — and Dr. Alvarez was in touch with all of them. Reaction was incredible — the applause was sustained, and several people said that if they had heard the regional reports before the election, they would have voted differently. There were even calls for a revote, although that would have created a logistical nightmare. Many people belatedly realized that because of prejudice against Cuba they had voted against a dynamic and supremely qualified candidate for the presidency.

There is a lesson here. If more of the scientists in TWOWS had had a broader political and historical perspective, they would have known that the American media conglomerates are not a reliable source of information about Third World countries, and they would have been aware that the U.S. has for many decades demonstrated superpower arrogance in its policies toward not only Cuba, but all of Latin America. Besides Cuba, the targets of U.S. military, economic, or political hostility have included Chile (the overthrow of the democratically elected government in 1973), Nicaragua (the Contra war of the 1980’s), Grenada (the invasion of 1983), Panama (the invasion of 1989), and Venezuela (attempts to overthrow the current democratically elected president).

We must not bury our heads in the sand and say that, because we are scientists, we have no need to think about social, political and historical issues. Even something as simple and straightforward as a TWOWS election can end badly if many people are politically gullible and ill-informed.