

Isis International: How Two Activists Ignited a Global Movement for Women's Liberation

Isis International stands as a lasting legacy to Marilee and Jane's audacious vision. It serves as a reminder that even the most deeply entrenched systems of power can be challenged when individuals dare to unite, organize, and demand a more just and equitable world. Their story is a testament to the power of individual conviction and the transformative potential of collective action.

Marilee: From New England Roots to Global Activism

Marilee's journey began in a modest New England family, where her father worked as a social worker and her mother as a teacher. Even at a young age, she possessed a keen sense of justice, questioning the inequalities she observed in the world. This nascent sense of activism propelled her, at the age of 17, to travel to North Dakota to contribute to building a community center for a Native American community—an early indication of her commitment to standing in solidarity with marginalized groups.

Her commitment deepened during her time at the University of Massachusetts, where she encountered the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Inspired by his message of equality and justice, she immersed herself in the civil rights movement, learning firsthand the power of collective action and the importance of fighting for systemic change. But she also saw how women who had fought alongside the men, their concerns of discrimination and oppression amongst their own ranks were ignored. She felt that if you could not bring change from within, then women could organize to bring change from without.

Marilee's activism extended beyond national borders. While based in Amsterdam in 1969, she participated in a social justice demonstration, an act that led to her arrest and expulsion from the country. Moving to Italy she went to work for the International Documentation on Contemporary Church (IDOC) as a writer, documentalist and researcher. It was here where she met like-minded women and a like-minded man who became the love of her life, partner and husband.

One of the women she met and befriended was Jane Cottingham. They both shared a common concern about the oppression of women. They both thought that there should be an organization like IDOC for women's groups as a way link them with one another, to break the isolation of their work, to provide moral support to each other and to learn from one another. Working at night, after their regular work hours, and on weekends, they put together their initial ideas: to create an organization of, by and for women, with an activist orientation; an organization that serves as an alternative, documentation and information center focused on materials produced by women's groups around the world; to provide communication channels for women, alternative to mainstream media, and building solidarity among women and their struggles. Together, their diverse backgrounds and unwavering dedication to women's liberation forged a powerful alliance. They co-founded Isis International, an organization that became a catalyst for transformative change, connecting women's groups, documenting their struggles, and fostering solidarity across borders.

Jane: From London Suburbs to a Feminist Awakening

Jane Cottingham's story begins in the northwest of London, where she was raised with traditional expectations. Her father worked in insurance, and her mother, a full-time homemaker, had relinquished her own career upon marriage. Jane was expected to follow a similar path: find a suitable husband and dedicate herself to domestic life. However, even from a young age, she harbored a quiet rebellion, a knowing that this prescribed future was not her own.

After attending secretarial school, Jane defied expectations by enrolling at Reading University in 1966 to study English and Philosophy. It was during this time that she encountered two lecturers involved in the burgeoning women's movement. They "planted the seeds," as she later recalled, introducing her to feminist ideas that challenged the very foundations of her upbringing.

Even after graduating, finding work, and experiencing the joys and complexities of falling in love, Jane began to question her life's direction. The stark reality of earning less than her male counterparts, coupled with the emergence of violence in her relationship, left her feeling trapped and disillusioned. Reading Germaine Greer's "The Female Eunuch" proved to be a pivotal moment, revealing that she was not alone in her struggles. She immersed herself in feminist literature and theory, seeking to understand the systemic forces shaping her experiences.

An opportunity at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva provided Jane with a new path. There, she began organizing women's groups, and the more she connected with other women, the more convinced she became of the urgent need for action. Working late into the night, she and Marilee Karl, whom she met in Geneva, began to formulate their initial ideas: an organization "by and for women with an activist orientation," serving as an alternative documentation and information center focused on materials produced by women's groups around the world, providing communication channels alternative to mainstream media, and building solidarity among women and their struggles.

In November 1974, Marilee and Jane presented their vision at the First International Feminist Conference in Frankfurt. Overwhelmed by the enthusiastic support of attending feminists, they envisioned such an organization as a "Women's International Information and Communication Service" and named it Isis, after the ancient mother goddess of creativity and knowledge.

