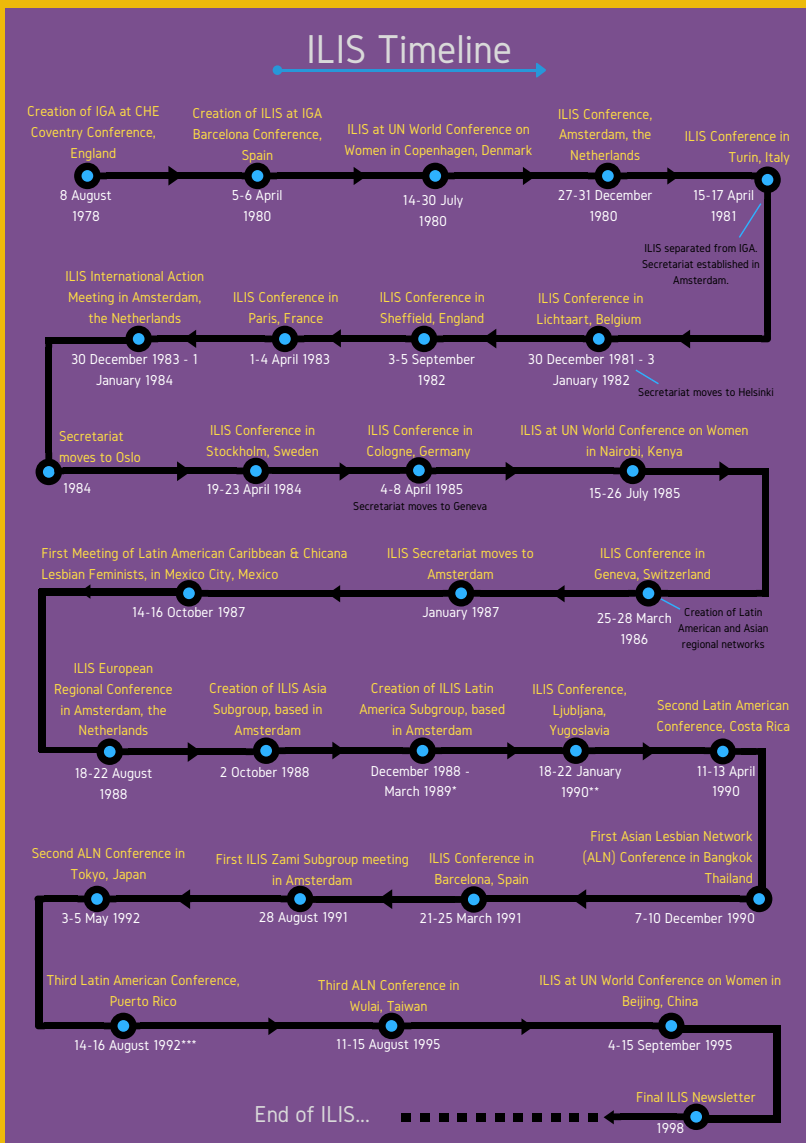


LEARNING FROM THE PAST: RETRIEVING THE HERSTORY OF INTERNATIONAL LESBIAN ORGANISING

The International Lesbian Information Service 1980-1998



A research by Belinda Dear

NOTES on the timeline (frontcover)

Annotations

*The exact date of the formation of the Latin America Subgroup remains unknown. In the last newsletter of 1988, ILIS members suggested the need for a Latin America Subgroup and in the March 1989 newsletter, news from the Latin America Subgroup is referred to. So by March it had been created, after an initial suggestion in late 1988, with no mention of the subgroup before this newsletter.

**Information for the number of people who attended the Ljubljana Conference is unavailable. This is partly due to the fact that only one ILIS document in the IHLIA collection contains confirmation that the conference took place. The workshop minutes therein are in direct conflict with the 1990 EEIP (Eastern Europe Information Pool) report which clearly states the conference did not take place. I would need to find members of the ALN who could clarify the situation, and this is not possible. The ILIS document mentions that "LOTS OF WOMEN!" attended the Ljubljana Conference.

***Information concerning the number of participants and whether any ILIS groups attended the Third Latin American Conference in Puerto Rico cannot be found due to there being no ILIS documents or conference report. This is because the United States refused to grant visas to the two Peruvian ILIS members living in the Netherlands who would have been representing the ILIS Latin America Subgroup.

Additional Conference Information

- ◆ 1980 UN World Conference on Women – ILIS representative: Haidy Möller.
- ◆ 1980 Amsterdam ILIS Conference was organised by Interpot and attended by 76 women from 17 countries.
- ◆ 1981 Turin ILIS Conference was held in Casa della Donna and attended by 210 women, of which 150 were Italian.
- ◆ 1982 Lichtaart ILIS Conference was organised by FWH (Federatie Werkgroepen Homofilie) and attended by roughly 90 women from 10 countries.
- ◆ 1982 Sheffield ILIS Conference was attended by about 30 women.
- ◆ 1983 Paris Conference was organised by MIEL (Mouvement d'Information et d'Expression des Lesbiennes) and attended by 221 women from 20 countries.
- ◆ 1983/4 Amsterdam ILIS Action Meeting was organised by Interpot and attended by about 50 women.
- ◆ 1984 Stockholm ILIS Conference was attended by 40 women from 9 countries.

- ◆ 1985 Cologne ILIS Conference was organised by Deutscher Lesbenring and attended by around 50 women.
- ◆ 1985 UN World Conference on Women – ILIS representatives: Sylvia Borren and Ricky Bartels. 50-150 lesbians attended their daily meetings, from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, Mexico, France, Puerto Rico, Spain, India, New Zealand, Australia, USA, England and Peru.
- ◆ 1986 Geneva ILIS Conference was organised by Vanille-Fraise and attended by 700 women from 23 countries.
- ◆ 1987 First Meeting of Latin American Caribbean and Chicana Lesbian Feminists, organised by L.A.L., attended by 250 lesbians and some ILIS women from Europe who also helped with workshops.
- ◆ 1988 Amsterdam ILIS Conference was organised by Interpot and attended by 40 women.
- ◆ 1990 Second Latin American Conference, organised by Grupo Lesbico-Feminista Costarricense Las Entendidas and attended by more than 70 Latina lesbians and women from the ILIS secretariat.
- ◆ 1990 First Asian Lesbian Network (ALN) Conference was organised by Anjaree and attended by 80 lesbians from at least 11 countries.
- ◆ 1991 Barcelona ILIS Conference was attended by 350 lesbians from over 10 European countries. Grant financing was made available for 20 Black lesbians and lesbians of colour to attend.
- ◆ 1992 Second Asian Lesbian Network Conference was organised by ALN-Nippon and attended by over 170 lesbians from 13 countries.
- ◆ 1992 Third Latin American Conference was organised by CELF (Coordinadora del Tercer Encuentro de Lesbianas Feministas).
- ◆ 1995 Third Asian Lesbian Network Conference was organised by ALN-Taiwan and attended by more than 140 lesbians from 8 countries.
- ◆ 1995 UN World Conference on Women – ILIS representatives: Ysabel Perez, José Maas, Janny Nieboer and Shelley Anderson.

For references please refer to the end of the booklet



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INTRODUCTION TO THE ILIS TIMELINE

On 6-8 October 2017 the European Lesbian* Conference was held in Vienna, Austria. It was originally advertised as the first ever European lesbian conference, however, this is not the case. From 1980 to roughly 1998 there existed an International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS) which organised no less than 11 European lesbian conferences, as well as supporting three Asian lesbian conferences and three Latin American lesbian conferences. Evien Tjabbes - a former member of ILIS - corrected the mistake, and was invited to speak about ILIS during the plenary history panel at the start of EL*C 2017, along with former fellow ILIS members Eva Isaksson and Lepa Mladjenovic. Lonneke van den Hoonaard - Managing Director of IHLIA LGBT Archives in Amsterdam - also spoke at the panel, to express the importance of archiving and retrieving our herstory. The discovery of this forgotten herstory presents an opportunity for the EL*C to look into the challenges and successes of the international lesbian organising of the past, and to learn and find inspiration from the near two decades worth of experience.

This timeline presents the European lesbian conferences organised and run by ILIS. It also includes the Latin American and Asian Lesbian Network conferences to which European ILIS members attended. These regional networks were set up at the 1986 ILIS conference in Geneva, and were run by local lesbian groups, not ILIS directly. As a result I have not entitled their conferences "ILIS Conference". The need for formal collaboration and communication between the ILIS secretariat and the regional networks was enabled through subgroups, which met on a regular basis in the Netherlands, usually in Amsterdam. This is because the secretariat during this time was held by Interpot, the international women's group of COC Nederland.

The ILIS secretariat, which also published regular ILIS newsletters, rotated as follows:

- Amsterdam 1980-81. Coordinated by Interpot. Published the ILIS cheap stencil service.
- Helsinki 1981-3. Published the ILIS Newsletter.
- Oslo 1984. Published the ILIS Newsletter.
- Geneva 1985-86. Coordinated by Vanille-Fraise. Published the ILIS Bulletin under CLIT 007.
- Amsterdam 1987-1998. Coordinated by Interpot. Published the ILIS Newsletter.

The secretariat had a backup for when they became too overwhelmed by the volume of work, and the city organising the conference also had a backup (another organisation from that city willing to help out). This ensured continuity of ILIS as well as its conferences. The organisation of conferences was carried out mainly by lesbian groups local to the country in which it was to be held, but with coordination also through ILIS.

Additionally, included in the timeline is the presence of ILIS representatives at 3 UN World Conferences on Women, in 1980 in Copenhagen, 1985 in Nairobi and 1995 in Beijing. Members of ILIS attended the NGO Forums which took place a week before and during the beginning of the conference. During the 1985 Nairobi NGO Forum ILIS organised a lesbian caucus and held workshops every day, and during the 1995 Beijing NGO Forum ILIS was granted its own "Lesbian Tent". Their presence ensured lesbian visibility and the uptake of lesbian issues at the conferences, through workshops, press releases and lobbying. In 1985 the Dutch Government spoke about the position of lesbian women at the official conference, and in 1995 ILIS were able to lobby for the inclusion of language concerning sexual orientation in the official final document of the conference.

ILIS subgroups included the Latin America subgroup (which liaised with the Latin American Lesbian Network), the Asia Subgroup (which liaised with the Asian Lesbian Network), and the Zami Subgroup which was formed in 1991 in order to address the needs of Black lesbians. In 1991 it was also suggested, during a secretariat meeting, to create a Disability Subgroup, but this never materialised.



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NATIONAL LESBIAN ORGANISING - SOME CONTEXT FOR ILIS

The scope of ILIS was extremely impressive especially considering that they did not have the help of the internet or emails for communicating with other lesbian groups across the world (except for only a couple of women gaining access to email in the mid-1990s). This truly was the first large scale international lesbian organising. However, for the sake of herstory, it is important to emphasise that lesbian organising on a national level had been taking place in Europe for many more decades. There is such a wealth of information just from the ILIS archival records held in IHLIA that it would be impossible to try to create an outline of the herstory of all lesbian organising in Europe. There are, however, some particularly impressive examples which I have decided to list below, to give an idea of the lesbian movements at the time.

During the 1980s it was quite common to have international lesbian summer camps organised by national groups. Between 1981-1983 there were at least 8 lesbian summer camps in France, including lesbians attending the annual Université d'Été Homosexuelle in Marseille. Lesbian camps were also very popular in Italy, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Norway during the 1980s.

Austria had 9 annual lesbian conferences in Vienna from 1981-1991, in Sweden the organisation Lesbian Feminists (LF) organised annual lesbian seminars from 1975-1983, and in Germany there was the Berliner Lesbenwoche every year from 1984-1997. Although the ILIS archives make no mention of it, in Germany there was also the Lesben-Frühlings-Treffen (LFT), an annual lesbian springtime gathering which began in 1974 and still continues to this day! Preoccupations concerning intersecting identities that expose people to increased oppression were already present in many lesbian groups in the 1970s and 1980s. As you will see, a number of ILIS conference workshops focussed on themes such as lesbians with disabilities, anti-semitism, anti-fascism and anti-racism. There is, however, only one mention of being trans in the ILIS archival material.* Some examples of early organising in this regard are the National Congress of Black Lesbians in England (the second congress took place in 1989), the lesbian group GEMMA - "a group of disabled and abled lesbians created

in England in 1976 to break the isolation of physically challenged lesbians”¹ and the 1991 Black Lesbian Conference in Berlin as part of Berliner Lesbenwoche.

As regards countries from the former socialist bloc, lesbian organising was extremely difficult until the early 1990s. One group, however, was exemplary in its ability to organise lesbian events. This was the Yugoslavian lesbian group known as Lezbiska Sekija which was created in 1988 from the women’s group LILIT of the Ljubljana Student Cultural Centre (SKUC). The lesbians in LILIT had introduced the first lesbian dance in November 1987, and then as Lezbiska Sekija they continued with lesbian dances, camps, poetry nights and the Ljubljana Lesbian Film Festival in December 1988.

*The one passage discussing this topic was in the 1980 ILIS Conference report on a workshop entitled “Transsexuality” (included in the workshop list below). This was the only word used, and so conflated transsexuality with transgender. There is clearly a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues, with theory around the difference between sex and gender totally absent. For example, it is stated “Transsexuals feel inside like a woman in a man - but can they really feel that, when they are not women? It is a question of society roles”. For the people in this workshop, society roles were paramount. For example, it is also stated that “A man who changes into a woman mostly becomes lesbian, because she is in search of tenderness... The reason why there are so few female transsexuals is because they want to avoid the role-pattern and they already can share tenderness”².



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1 | See ILIS Newsletter 1985_15, p. 34

2 | See Amsterdam 1980 Conference report, p. 5

ILIS DEMANDS

The international ILIS demands were drawn up in 1984 and presented at the NGO Forum of the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985. They remained ILIS's demands until the end of the organisation* and are as follows:

- Girls and women have the unconditional right to control their own bodies
- Girls and women have the right to education that is not heterosexist - that includes positive information about lesbians and lesbian lifestyles
- Lesbians have the right to self-organisation
- All governments must repeal legislation that criminalises or discriminates against homosexual women and men
- All governments must pass human rights legislation to protect individuals against discrimination based on colour, class, creed, sex and sexual preference

*In later versions from the 1990s sentences started with "we have the right to..." and "discriminates against homosexual women and men" changed to "discriminates against us".

In order to fine-tune their demands in preparation for the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, the secretariat asked their readers to reflect on the following questions: *"But just what are lesbian human rights? What are our demands? What do we need in order to live our lives in the best ways we can?"* To answer questions like these we need more concrete information on the realities of our lives, and the ways lesbians around the world are resisting oppression. We welcome your reports on how lesbians are living in your country. In particular, we welcome contact with lesbians in Africa and we apologize for the lack of information presented below about that important region of the world."³ There then followed a number of country specific summaries. At that time in Europe, lesbians could still be jailed for several years in Romania for having sex with another woman. In the United Kingdom, lesbian mothers were frequently denied custody of their children and access to reproductive technology, and non-British partners of British lesbians denied permission to stay in the UK. They then decided to focus on 3 specific issues: 1. Lesbian visibility, 2. Family, and 3. Lesbian health.

3 | See ILIS Newsletter 1994_2, pp. 14-18

1. The article stated that one of the biggest obstacles lesbians faced was lack of visibility: “This invisibility means we are *denied important information about ourselves*. We are *not taught our history in schools*, our books and music are censored, our very existence is denied. This silence perpetuates two of the most destructive myths about lesbians. The first myth is that we simply do not exist. The second myth is that, *if we do exist, we are a white Western import*. Both these myths are damaging to millions of lesbians around the world. They perpetuate our invisibility, and hence, the discrimination many lesbians face regularly.”

Although lesbians (and gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people) have gained comparatively more visibility over the years, when we step outside our queer bubbles there is still a lot of work to be done, especially in rural areas and at schools. Lesbians are very often not mentioned in sexual education classes, let alone in history classes. What is of increasing importance concerning activism on an international level, is this idea that lesbians (and other “deviations” regarding sexual orientation and gender identity), are a white Western import. There is considerable literature around this especially in regard to the former socialist bloc, prospective EU member states, and global diplomacy in relation to LGBT rights. The mobilisation of homophobic discourse in some Central and Eastern European countries often hinges on this rhetoric of LGBT people, and therefore the need for their rights, being a Western import. Debates on this also hinge on what the meaning of “European” is: how do we delineate it? Does the “West” decide what’s right for the “rest”? Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte’s book “Anti-Gender Movements in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality” explains how conservative actors understand advancements in LGBT and women’s rights as “a symptom of the deprivation of EuroAmerica, [and] can be read as a neocolonial project through which Western activists and their governments try to export their decadent values and secularize non-Western societies”⁴.

2. The lack of legal protection for lesbian partnerships affected lesbian family life in the areas of residence permits (splitting families apart), and even where same-sex relationships were legally recognised lesbians were denied custody rights and adoption (sometimes even of the children of their partners).

4 | Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte 2017, p. 20

With the establishment of the Schengen area and the EU's laws on freedom of movement, as well as the increase in the number of EU member states recognising legal partnerships and even same-sex marriage, there are far fewer barriers to obtaining residence permits for same-sex partners. The recent court ruling in Hungary⁵, as well as the pending European Court of Justice ruling⁶ regarding the residence rights in Romania of an American spouse of a Romanian man (the updates look promising - a decision is expected in Spring 2018⁷), show the ongoing barriers facing LGBT families, but also the progress in action. Despite freedom of movement, national legislation regarding adoption and child custody rights still vary across the continent, which also presents challenges for international couples. You can look at ILGA-Europe's 2018 Rainbow Map⁸ to see the legal situation across Europe regarding adoption (among many other laws).

3. In terms of health; where lesbianism was classified as a psychiatric disorder this sometimes resulted in forced institutionalisation and treatment, and lesbians were totally ignored in AIDS documentation and research. On this last point the situation has, of course, radically improved (AIDS research now includes lesbians, and specifically identifies trans women as one of the groups most at risk of HIV infection, and homosexuality was depathologised by the World Health Organisation in 1992). However, it is still important to focus attention on the physical and mental health needs of trans lesbians and lesbians who are subjected to discrimination, and to lobby for the de-pathologization of trans identities globally⁹.

5 | See Budapest court rules foreign same-sex marriages must be recognised in Hungary <https://www.ilga-europe.org/resources/news/latest-news/budapest-court-equal-marriage>

6 | See Freedom of movement for all families? Same-sex couple ask EU court for recognition <https://www.ilga-europe.org/resources/news/latest-news/cjeu-coman-hearing-nov2017>

7 | See Freedom of movement and same-sex couples in Romania – case update! <https://www.ilga-europe.org/resources/news/latest-news/Coman-AGopinion-Jan2018>

8 | Available at https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/index_2018_print_0.pdf

9 | See campaign Stop Trans Pathologization Worldwide <http://stp2012.info/old/en>

ILIS WORKSHOP THEMES

During the ILIS conferences, many workshops were held along a variety of themes. When ILIS was no longer holding regular conferences, these themes would be addressed in their newsletters, which also increasingly contained country-specific reports on lesbian life from around the globe.

Below is a list of the most recurring themes, all of which are still relevant for lesbian* activism today. I will explain the discussions that took place during the ILIS conferences around a few of the themes, which I believe could be of particular interest for future lesbian* workshop themes. "Working in mixed organisations vs lesbian autonomy" and "ILIS structure" shed light on the organisational challenges and successes of ILIS, as well as its foundational theory. The other themes are of increasing relevance today, and their workshop reports contained information and strategies that could be of use to the EL*C.

ILIS workshop/newsletter themes:

- ◇ **Working in mixed organisations**
- ◇ **Lesbians and radical feminism/lesbianism (autonomy)**
- ◇ **Racism (also intersection with anti-semitism, heterosexism, classism)**
- ◇ **Fascism**
- ◇ **Older lesbians**
- ◇ **Lesbian motherhood/parenting**
- ◇ **Lesbians and disability**
- ◇ **Rural lesbians**
- ◇ **ILIS structure** (also strategies, political actions, building and reinforcing an international lesbian movement)
- ◇ Lesbian visibility
- ◇ Lesbians and the law
- ◇ Lesbian physical & mental health (including AIDS)
- ◇ Transsexuality
- ◇ Lesbian archives
- ◇ Lesbian youth
- ◇ Lesbians in the peace movement

- ◇ Lesbians and spirituality
- ◇ Lesbian sexuality
- ◇ Eastern Europe
- ◇ Lesbians and sado-masochism
- ◇ Lesbians and employment
- ◇ Lesbians and the media

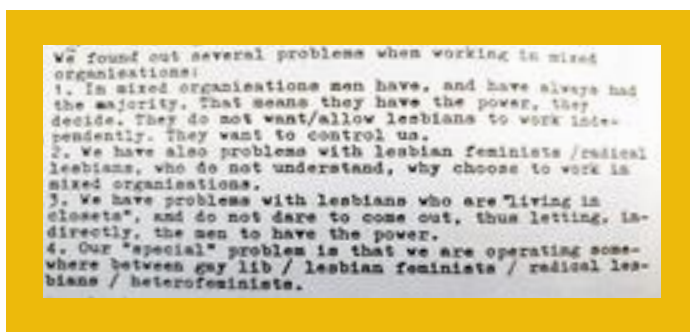


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Working in mixed organisations vs lesbian autonomy

As indicated in the timeline, IGA (the International Gay Association) was founded in 1978, with no women present at their initial meeting in Coventry in the United Kingdom. Their name also referred to “gay women”, a term preferred by many lesbians at the time. At the 1980 IGA annual conference in Barcelona, the women present (45 of 170 people), decided that the IGA meetings did not allow enough time and space for discussing lesbian issues, and therefore decided to establish ILIS, which became independent from IGA in 1981. IGA still kept its Women’s Secretariat. The issue of working in mixed organisations had always been a topic of discussion at ILIS conferences, and was also extended to working with feminist organisations. In the former reside issues with sexism, in the latter reside issues with homophobia. There were a number of workshops focussing on “working in mixed organisations” or “lesbianism and feminism” in the ILIS conferences over the years, with the same issues being rai-

sed. In the 1982 conference, during a workshop on lesbianism and feminism, women from MIEL (a French lesbian organisation), complained of the “pervasive homophobia”¹⁰ of the feminist movement in France, and how their energies were spent on issues that mainly affected heterosexual women, thereby rendering lesbians invisible. The workshop concluded that lesbians needed to take lesbian stands on issues, such as challenging oppressive structures and institutions (the nuclear family, patriarchy, religion and capitalism), and no longer take responsibility for explaining lesbianism to the women’s movement. In the 1983 Conference the workshop on “working in mixed organisations” explained the benefits of working with mixed gay organisations, as they had often existed for 10-30 years and therefore had money, power, experience and were respected by (some) authorities. However, there still remained the risk of lesbian labour being co-opted for mainly gay men’s causes. They drew up the following conclusions, which effectively explained the need for ILIS to exist:



1983 conference report, p.16

They concluded that collaborations with feminist or mixed organisations would be necessary, but they needed to decide together on the groups with which they would collaborate.

It is interesting to note that the inception of ILIS parallels the inception of the EL*C in that both decided that the I(L)GA was not adequately addressing the needs of lesbians*. IGA is what we now know as ILGA, and the EL*C was born from an ILGA-

10 | See Lichtaart 1982 Conference report, p. 3

Europe conference. Ideologically speaking, it is therefore clear that this new European lesbian* movement will be straddling the lines of collaboration - as regards mixed organisations such as ILGA, and the more radical feminist demands of being entirely autonomous. In short; some lesbians* take issue with working with men, and some lesbians* take issue with working with feminist groups that might contain transphobic, biphobic or lesbophobic women.

“Women are a minority in the IGA. The IGA women’s secretariat is supposed to look after women’s interests, but not all lesbians are in the IGA - for various reasons. It is generally considered that more women are willing to work in an independent ILIS than an IGA-dependent ILIS. Therefore the need for ILIS.” (ILIS 1981 Conference report, p. 3 - Eva Isaksson)

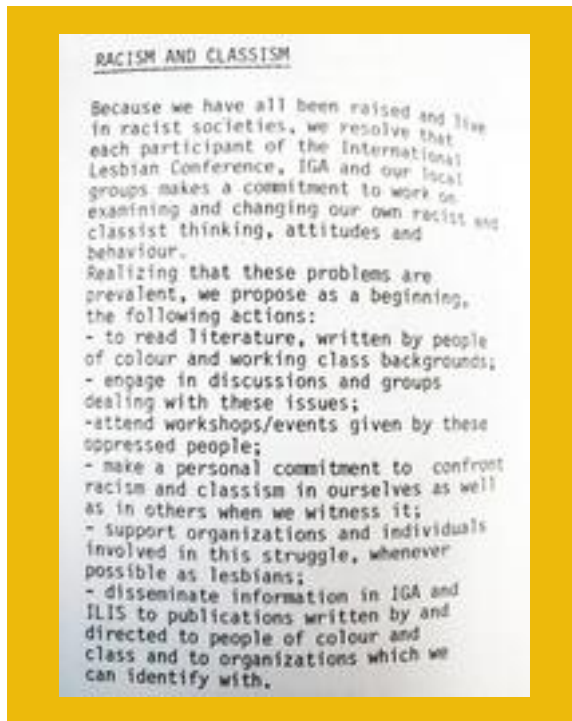
Racism

ILIS was concerned about racism throughout its existence, not only in terms of combatting it as a lesbian movement but also in terms of combating racism within the lesbian movement. Almost every single ILIS conference held a workshop on racism, and many newsletters included articles on racism. When the workshops were not focussed exclusively on racism they usually involved how racism is inextricably linked to fascism, and how it is interlinked with classism, sexism and anti-semitism. ILIS were also outspoken against apartheid, including articles about Black lesbians during apartheid in their newsletters (1986 and 1988), taking actions such as boycotting banks which invested in apartheid, and fundraising for anti-apartheid movements.

“Anti-racist struggles should be every woman’s struggle” (ILIS 1986_20, p. 18)

From the first ILIS conference in 1980, ILIS committed to analysing and confronting the racism and classism within their own movement, proposing the following list of actions: (See next page).

After the 1981 Turin Conference workshop on racism, ILIS decided to publish a list of books dealing with the topic in the newsletter that followed. The intersections of oppression targeted at people belonging to minority groups was emphasised at all the conference workshops on racism. However, ILIS often had to deal with racism at their conferences, in particular the 1986 Geneva Conference and the 1991 Barcelona



(ILIS online conference reports, p. 64)

Conference. During a very productive workshop in Geneva, in which experiences were shared and political actions decided upon, some white women interrupted the workshop stating that racism wasn't a problem in their countries, that lesbians couldn't be racist, and tried to turn the workshop into a consciousness raising group rather than one focussed on political action strategy. At the Barcelona Conference there was a large amount of confrontation and disagreement between certain white women and Black lesbians and lesbians of colour.

One excellent outcome of the Barcelona Conference, however, was the creation of a Zami newsletter. This was supposed to be a regular publication but I have only found one in IHLIA's archives. This newsletter was 1991_4 and included articles on white privilege, racism, acculturated language, freedom to travel, Two-Spirited people, and reflections on the impact of colonialism on indigenous women. The article on acculturated language is particularly interesting, as it analyses certain words and phrases in the Dutch and English language, looking at the dates they were coined and what

they used to mean at the time (for example words like “black market”, “blackmail”, “zwart rijders”) ¹¹.

“Racism = power + prejudice... People of colour can be prejudiced (they can pre-judge white people), but this is not “racism”. (In other words, there is no such thing as “reverse racism”).” (ILIS 1990_3, pp. 20-21)

Many of the discussions in the articles are still relevant today. As claimed in articles on structural racism, racism is rooted in our culture and societies, and therefore unless people actively educate themselves, they will not see the problem or truly understand what racism is. In the current mainstream discourse on racism, claims such as the “reverse racism” mentioned above are views held by many white people, unaware of their privilege. In order to tackle potential prejudices within activist movements, as well as empowering lesbians* to join anti-racist struggles, the actions proposed by ILIS are still useful today. Sharing books and publications, holding anti-racist workshops, creating space for Black people and people of colour to express themselves and to organise actions, and encouraging people to do their own research, is essential. Fundraising, boycotting, and organising marches and protests are all useful actions.

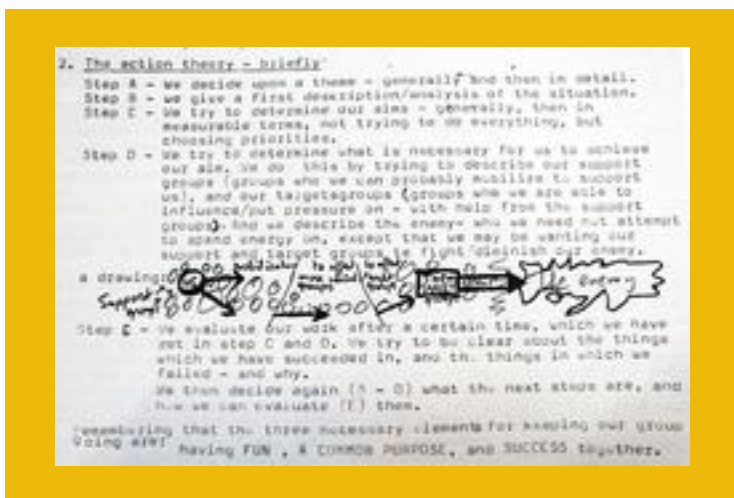
Fascism

The majority of discussion around fascism took place during the 1984 Stockholm Conference and the 1985 Cologne Conference. In Stockholm, women from various countries shared their stories of fascist attacks and death threats against lesbians, discussing fascist ideology and how it threatens anyone who doesn't fit into the norm (that is heterosexual, cisgender, white, European, without disability). In both 1984 and 1985 it was stressed that fascism is inherently heterosexist and violent towards women and especially lesbians, as they refuse the role of mother and wife. To quote the Cologne Conference Report, “Fascism is the culmination of the ideology of racial and biological differences. It is naturally opposed to feminism and even more so to lesbianism since lesbians refuse the traditional role of women as wife and mother” ¹². Disabled lesbians raised their concerns about being even more targeted by fascism, due to its idea of a pure race and its intolerance of weakness.

¹¹ | See *ILIS Newsletter 1991_4*, pp.7-9

¹² | *ILIS Newsletter 1985_15*, p. 22

In both conferences it was agreed that there needed to be more consciousness-raising in the lesbian movement about the dangers of fascism. It was stressed that racism and fascism are inextricably linked and ILIS needs to fight it where it occurs within and outside the movement. In this regard the possibility of women and lesbians also being attracted by fascist ideology was discussed, specifically through the glorification of motherhood and nationalism, as well as the sense of security (fascist propaganda claimed there is no rape or street harassment under fascism). In Cologne the lesbians agreed to organise anti-fascist demonstrations, pamphlets and radio emissions like the antifascist lesbians had been doing in Paris. They also concluded the need for autonomous lesbian groups and self-defence in terms of their own bodies and spaces. In Stockholm they conducted a 3 day workshop on using the following "Action Theory" to combat fascism:



(Online conference reports, p. 16)

Using the example of the Maranata (a religious group that publicly stated in Sweden and Norway that homosexuals should be eliminated), they created a strategy to mobilise support groups to make agreements with influencers (such as church leaders, trade unions and political parties) to convince the courts and government to take action. They also created posters, lists of groups and actions to be taken by each, a postcard template and a draft press release for announcing actions such as demonstrations. Below you can see their draft for the press release, which most notably emphasises as a title the limitation of free speech regarding fascism:

-Catchy headline (e.g. from the poster: Telling us to die is not freedom of speech.

-announcement of event,

-and of our aim in organising that

-and of ourselves (introduction)

-Our arguments for our freedom to live our own lives : presented in the positive sense 'ofcourse it is clear and obvious that Lesbian

-A brief shocked description of what the Maranata are doing/saying

-The stressing of the dangers of the Maranata - link to fascism, danger of them influencing the public opinion, scape goatism etc.

-Brief argument about freedom of speech having limits (always) and of the importance to use those limits on Maranata.

-What we demand in our action campaign, and from who (target groups)

-What we want others (readers) to do.

-Our contact address/etc. for more information. (Important : phone-number with someone present and prepared to comment if journalists ring up for more information).

(Online conference reports, p. 22)

Many of the groups who had been attacking lesbians are the same fascist groups that are around today, such as the KKK in the United States and neo-nazi groups in Germany and Norway. Fascism is still a concern in many European societies, especially with the increasing polarization in politics that we are seeing across the continent, and a notable shift of the political spectrum to the right. People on the far-right, and neo-fascist groups, are relying on freedom of speech to spread their hate. The above press release and other information from the Stockholm Conference report can be very useful for articulating and creating an anti-fascist stance and action plan. Below you can also see an example of lesbian organising that is very helpful in halting the spread of fascist ideology:

One positive example is the international and multiracial meeting of lesbians (including Jewish and disabled lesbians) sponsored by the Lesbian Archives in Leeuwarden (Holland) to raise lesbian visibility in society and to show that lesbians refuse the mechanisms of discrimination.

(ILIS 1985_15, p. 22)

There are extensive minutes of these workshop reports in the IHLIA archive. To find these conference reports search the online catalogue with “*Conference reports: 6th ILIS conference 19-23 April 1984, Stockholm; 5th ILIS conference 1-4 April 1983, Paris; 4th ILIS conference Augustus 1982, Sheffield; 3rd ILIS conference 30 December 1981 - 3 January 1982, Antwerp; 1st ILIS conference 27 December 1980 - 1 January 1981, Amsterdam. Includes cheap stencil service ILIS 81:1, 81:2.*” The action strategy can be found on pages 16-25 of this document.

Older Lesbians

The topic of older lesbians was addressed in workshops in the 1986 Geneva Conference and the 1991 Barcelona Conference. In Barcelona the workshop was open to lesbians over the age of 45, and both workshops were for sharing life experiences and creating support groups among elderly lesbians.

The 1998 ILIS newsletter reported on the course “Lesbisch op leeftijd/The Aging Lesbian” created by Ans van de Scheur to create a network of lesbians over 50 to network and articulate their specific demands to advise policy for city government and local institutions. The newsletter also reported on Judith Schuyf’s 1996 research on the specific needs of elderly lesbians. Her findings were that elderly women were much more often single than elderly men and suffer from isolation. “They have relatively little contact with family, they feel ill at ease with heterosexuals and excluded from the younger lesbian subculture (the same goes for men over 75).”¹³

The 1998 ILIS newsletter recognised the large number of elderly women in the Netherlands, of which a significant amount would be lesbians. Since 1998 many European countries are witnessing the demographic change known as ageing population, and therefore this issue is even more relevant today. Judith Schuyf recommended creating lesbian groups in community centres with specific outreach to older lesbians, as well as running social activities such as dances for over 45s. The “Lesbisch op leeftijd/The Aging Lesbian” project is also an inspiration, and the discussions informed the Amsterdam workgroup “Policy Advising/Making for the Homo/Lesbian Elderly” which advised city government and social institutions.

¹³ | *ILIS Newsletter 1998, pp. 16-17*

Lesbians and Motherhood

As a workshop this topic was popular throughout ILIS' existence, appearing in the 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1985 conferences, and continuing to be a topic in ILIS newsletters up until the final one in 1998, including in the "action section" where readers were asked to support lesbian custody cases. On a theoretical level there was much discussion around whether lesbian mothers were socialised into thinking they should have children due to the enforced gender roles of the patriarchy, or whether they were actually subverting it by proving that lesbians can be mothers and offering an alternative view of motherhood. This of course, ignored the case of women who were mothers through heterosexual relationships. As a result, discussions varied from finding ways of creating support networks for lesbian mothers as well as improving access to information about artificial insemination, finances, and schools, to making lesbians more aware of their own attitudes and fears concerning motherhood and mothers and their children. Practical solutions involved support groups, childcare commitments, extended family arrangements, collective living, good practice exchange groups between mothers and those wanting to be mothers, and exchange of information and support regarding child custody.

The most pressing issues at the time involved child custody cases, as the mother was very rarely awarded custody over her child if she was a lesbian. In Belgium in 1985, even if the child no longer had a father, a lesbian biological mother was required to give it up for adoption and then apply to adopt it, as a lesbian mother was not deemed to be in the best interests of the child. Another problem was the impact of societal prejudice against both mother and child regarding the stigma of lesbian mothers. In order to reach mothers who might need support but not know of women's or lesbian groups, it was suggested that lesbian mothers' groups be formed to spread information to the general public (especially parents, teachers, and doctors) about alternative parenthood.

The issue of child custody has moved on a lot since 1985. The legal situation has improved greatly for biological mothers and their partners, even regarding their partners' adoption/parental rights over their child. Stigma that manifests in discrimination against the children of lesbian mothers is still a problem, but there are now EU

anti-discrimination laws that address this. However, we still live in a heteronormative and patriarchal society, so actions to disseminate information about alternative motherhood and family lifestyles will still be useful for those mothers struggling to cope with these issues on their own.

Lesbians and Disability

On the whole, ILIS discussions around disability were largely absent. In the conferences where lesbians and disability workshops were due to take place, they either did not take place, were merged with the physical health workshops, or lasted a much shorter amount of time than anticipated. In the newsletters, letters from frustrated lesbians were published, but the topic was not addressed by lesbians without disabilities. Eva Isaksson - a member of the Helsinki ILIS secretariat from 1981-1983, is deaf, and wrote an article in the July 1983 ILIS newsletter about disability, and how lesbians need to take it seriously.¹⁴ She talked of the parallels between society's attitudes not so long ago regarding lesbianism, and the lesbians' attitudes towards disability in ILIS conferences. For example, claiming it was a private problem rather than a public one, and regarding lesbians with disabilities as outside of the "norm" (she critically analysed what she saw as the lesbian norm - namely independent and active). Eva reported that the main barriers to lesbians with disabilities at the 1983 Paris Conference were accessibility in the Maison des Femmes (stairs, bathrooms), and accessibility in terms of the workshops (interpreters).

Agnès, from Paris, expressed her disappointment at the 1986 Geneva Conference in the June 1986 ILIS newsletter ¹⁵. She wrote about problems of accessibility of lesbian spaces and of the press (audiovisual material), which left less room for discussion around other topics such as sexuality, lovers, and hatred. Despite her articles appearing in various lesbian publications, Agnès still felt excluded due to the paternalistic attitude of some lesbians and for not being taken seriously. She described the difficulty of the paradox of having to ask for help in order to be autonomous. In the short workshop on disability the concept of lesbian beauty was discussed, and the issue of women without disabilities not understanding that women with disabilities could be lesbians.

¹⁴ | See *ILIS Newsletter 1983_11*, pp. 7-8

¹⁵ | See *ILIS Newsletter 1986_19*, p. 23

Both Eva and Agnès talked about the difficulty of relationships for lesbians with disabilities, due to stereotypes of them being asexual, norms painting them as less attractive, and practical difficulties scaring lesbians without disabilities away. Both stressed the benefits for everyone in making lesbian spaces accessible. Agnès provided practical suggestions such as: columns in magazine articles to be separated by lines, books and articles in braille or on cassette, conducting sign language workshops at conferences, and of course, making conference locations accessible for people in wheelchairs. In the 1991 newsletter, Ilona Ivey wrote a short summary of her impressions of the 1991 Barcelona Conference ¹⁶. She was critical of a number of elements regarding organising, specifically accessibility for lesbians with disabilities, and the handling of racism within the movement.

Much progress has been made in Europe in combating the stigma around people with disabilities and in recognising their needs in order to make public as well as private spaces more accessible. Although the early 1980s were a long time ago, paying attention to the accessibility of locations, discussions and publications is paramount to making everyone feel included and allowing everyone to contribute to the movement to their full potential. There is always more that can be done.

Rural Lesbians

In the 1985 Cologne Conference there was a workshop dedicated to the topic of rural lesbians. Through exchanges of personal experiences it was concluded that women living in villages were incredibly isolated. The influence of religion is often higher in village communities, and parents are often pressured by religious and social norms, making it difficult for lesbians to communicate with them. Coming out, and living openly as a lesbian is a very different experience in rural areas compared to urban ones. The workshop concluded with the following action proposals: outreach through active lesbian groups from larger cities visiting villages to raise the visibility of lesbians (can be done simply by being there, or also through cultural activities such as theatre), distributing information in schools in rural areas.

¹⁶ | See *ILIS Newsletter 1991_2*, p. 12

Today there is a widening divide between rural and urban areas. As young people increasingly migrate to the cities, those who remain are subject to even more isolation. However, we now have internet and so in this regard things may be better, but creating lesbian spaces or communities in rural areas remains important and still a challenge.

ILIS STRUCTURE & COMMUNICATIONS

As we have seen, the ILIS secretariat rotated between Amsterdam, Helsinki, Oslo and Geneva. The decision as to whether the secretariat moved or stayed where it was made at every conference. The idea was that despite different groups having to take time to learn about the functions of the secretariat, it would avoid ILIS concentrating its actions too much on particular countries, and it would avoid bureaucratisation. The secretariat took charge of contact and correspondence with member groups, the production of the newsletter, finances, keeping the ILIS archives, and coordinating actions (or delegating actions to other member groups).

As regards voting and membership, theory differed somewhat from practice. The theory stated that only groups rather than individuals could become members and therefore vote. Each group had one vote, which meant smaller groups could have equal vote weighting to larger groups such as the COC Nederland, which was important to ILIS as one of their aims was to empower smaller organisations. Small groups unable to afford the membership fee could apply for cooperative membership with other small groups. The secretariat would make use of a sliding financial scale to help small groups who could not find other groups to form a cooperative membership with. Member groups could only vote once they had paid their membership fee, as this was the way ILIS funded its newsletters and conferences. Any group or individual woman could become an associate member of ILIS, with a smaller fee, in order to receive the newsletter. Additionally, conferences were open to any women, whether in member groups, associate members or not a member at all, and as voting could not be done by individuals, they could lobby voting decisions instead. Other ways of financing were fundraising events (such as dances), which were also useful for raising the visibility of ILIS.

In practice, however, payments for membership were scarce, due to lack of finance of many groups and because international payments were complicated and often more expensive than the membership itself. ILIS often still sent newsletters to groups that were unable to pay the membership fee, and published their group information in the newsletters. ILIS also sent the newsletter to women or groups who they felt were important and could make good use of the information therein. Finances were

a real problem for ILIS, and the number of newsletters produced and actions implemented often depended on the finances of the group hosting the secretariat at that time. Due to many groups being unable to afford membership fees, voting would have been too scarce if it were reserved just for fee-paying groups, and as a result ILIS decided to be lenient on voting rules.

ILIS newsletters were used for communications such as advertising literature suggestions (for novels as well as theory around racism, feminism, activism etc), pen pals, events, new groups, and cultural exchanges. ILIS asked national lesbian groups to delegate two women to relay information to them so they could advertise and publish articles about the events and news of the countries in the newsletter. They also started a "twinning" system by which member groups could "twin" with groups from other countries. This was particularly useful in expanding the ILIS network more internationally. It is important to bear in mind that during the majority of the time ILIS existed, there was no internet. ILIS had an email account by the early 1990s, but many of her members would not have done, therefore typed letters were the main form of communication, and the process of sending and receiving replies often took weeks. Given this situation, it is truly remarkable the extent to which ILIS managed to organise an international network, involving international actions and exchanges, as well as so many very well attended conferences!

To ensure the workshops were as productive as possible, workshop papers were drawn up beforehand and distributed to ILIS members. ILIS would also often circulate questionnaires asking for information from other countries regarding the workshop topic. At the conference, women could call for workshops which had not been prepared beforehand and their resulting proposals would also be considered at the final plenary session. For topics already discussed at previous conferences, papers were distributed outlining previous discussions, decisions, and results, so as to avoid repetition or a feeling of stagnation as regards progress on the topic. This was in fact a recurring preoccupation, as quoted below from the 1987 conference, which contributed to the eventual decline of ILIS:

Then some of us do not attend, as after a while we find an ILIS conference just another repetition of what has been. Lack of progress with regard to internal discussions and attitudes have left some of us reluctant if not disappointed and frustrated.

(ILIS 1987_2, p. 12)

The lack of progress described above was also due to the difficulty of communication between conferences, raising finances, daily life taking over, and also the fact that the older, more established, organisations (generally mixed or male) were more equipped to carry out actions such as writing protest letters, lobbying, investigating etc.



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ILIS ACTIONS & STRATEGIES

As a result, it is clearly important that there be concrete proposals and actions produced at the conferences. As Eva Isaksson said in the 1981 Conference report: "We should ask ourselves the following question: what is the meaning of international support that is reduced to sympathy, because there are no channels for it?"¹⁷

ILIS set up a "watch-dog committee", composed of 3 member groups, which judged whether a requested action was in line with the aims of ILIS. If approved, the ILIS secretariat was informed and then coordinated the action (usually through the newsletters). Members were allowed full flexibility as to the participation in an ILIS collective action. They could participate fully or not at all, or partially via working on issues through legal procedures, protesting, lobbying or being civil-disobedient, or by protesting through artistic expression. In this way, ILIS could join forces and still do things in their own particular way, without obliging any person or group to go against their own ideas.

Examples of actions are: the organising of protests, demonstrations, fundraising events, visibility campaigns (spray painting, making posters etc). Newsletter calls for action included asking for: the sending of protest letters to ministries about discriminatory legislation, the signing of petitions (e.g. international petition to the European Parliament on legislation against discrimination at work), political lobbying, financing trials supporting lesbians being taken to court for "immoral actions" or lesbians taking employers to court for firing them for their sexual orientation. On the next page is an example of a call for action that was published in the ILIS 1993 Autumn newsletter:

¹⁷ | *ILIS 1981 Conference report, p. 4*

MOVILH
The Homosexual Liberation Movement informs:

Santiago de Chile,
8th of september 1993

1. In the morning of the 4th of september a fire destroyed the gay disco Divise in the city of Valparaiso. The causes the fire are still unknown. 18 persons- all homosexual- lost their lives and twelve others injured.
2. This fact has caused strong feelings in the public opinion, deep pain and impact in the lesbian/homosexual community, both in Valparaiso and on national level.
3. The testimonies of witness and survivals give us reason to believe, that it was an attent against the gay community in Chile.
4. The lesbian and homosexual organization together with other non governmental organizations (NGO's) and political parties declared today in a press conference that the authorities have to set up a special minister to investigate deeply the facts and bring to the surface the real causes of this tragedy.

In this situation we solicitate:

1. That you send polite letters asking for thorough investigation in

Ministro del Interior	Ministro de Justicia	Presidente de la Corte Suprema
Enrique Krauss	Francisco Cumplido	Marco Abarca Ochoa
Palacio de la Moneda	Morandé 107	Bandera 044 2.Piso
Santiago de Chile	Santiago de Chile	Presidencia
		Santiago de Chile

2. That you send copies of teh letters to the Chilean Ambassy in your country and to our organization.
3. That you make this tragic event known to all lesbians and homosexual organizations, human rights organizations and other institutions that you consider relevant.
4. Our organization is unable to give economic support to the relatives don't have money to pay for the medical and psychological service of the surviving victims and to cover the expenses for the funerals of those who died. That's why we ask you for economical support and solidarity. The donation can be send to:

Marco Ruiz Delgado

(ILIS Autumn 1993, p. 26)

In the 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984 conferences ILIS and its members were preparing for an International Lesbian Year (due to take place in 1984), that never materialised. During these conferences potential actions were brainstormed. I will list some of their ideas, as they may be useful still!

≈ Actions to help closeted or isolated lesbians: articles in feminist and women's magazines, radio and TV programmes, coming out activities in restaurants, dances, handing out pamphlets, kissing in the street action

≈ Actions to build and strengthen our own lifestyles: lesbian study weeks 'lesbian universities', summer camps, lesbian festivals, lesbian music events, project inviting lesbians to write lesbian stories, theatre & film scripts

≈ Actions towards society/against discrimination: “lesbians accuse society” booklet
- individual case stories used to illustrate a general analysis of our situation, international spray-painting campaign e.g. “Eliane Morrissens was sacked” to get people questioning, national & international protest marches, lesbian cartoons against society, lesbian articles, leaflets, protest songs etc, fighting oppressive bodies such as the Catholic Church using chain letters, sit ins, raids etc.



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One excellent resource for understanding the rise and fall of ILIS, as well as the various actions and strategies carried out by different member groups, is the ILIS Cookbook. I highly recommend you to read it, if you are interested in a comprehensible description of the challenges of organising and coordinating a long-lasting international lesbian movement. It outlines the ideological and organisational challenges, explaining how to navigate the balance between what you can give and what you can achieve. As many ILIS women experienced burn-out in the 1990s, this could be a very useful resource for learning how to set realistic aims and how to create action out of internal conflict, in order that the movement can endure and prosper. You can find it in English and Spanish at the IHLIA archives. You can request a visit to the archive via the website: <http://www.ihlia.nl/information-desk/?lang=en>

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