ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE FOR THE DEVELOPING WORLD

OWSD aims to bring women scientists together to strengthen their position in scientific and technological leadership. Professor Xin Fang, President of OWSD and Dr Tonya Blowers, Programme Coordinator, elucidate the Organization’s current objectives, with input from Sophia Huyer, Director of the GenderInSITE – Gender in science, innovation, technology and engineering campaign, and Dorothy Ngila, OWSD South Africa National Chapter.

From what context did the concept for establishing a developing world organisation for women in science emerge?

The idea was first discussed at a conference on ‘The Role of Women in the Development of Science and Technology in the Third World’, which was convened by The World Academy of Science (TWAS) and the Canadian International Development Agency in Trieste, Italy, held on 3-7 October 1988.

The participants of the conference – including 218 leading women scientists from 63 developing countries – recommended that a study group be set up to explore the possibility of creating an organisation that would address the lack of representation and participation of women in science from developing countries.

Subsequently, the group was formed and, at its meeting in Trieste on 20-22 March 1989, it was decided to establish the then named Third World Organization for Women in Science (TWOWS) and to adopt a constitution for the organisation.

TWOWS was officially launched in Cairo, Egypt, on the occasion of its first General Assembly, a major conference that took place on 10-13 January 1993 and was generously supported by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science.
What unique issues are women scientists in the developing world facing?

SH: In general, there are few differences in the challenges faced by women in the developing and developed worlds. The main challenge is domestic and family responsibilities. A recent global survey conducted by scientists at the American Institute of Physics found that globally women in both the developed and developing worlds feel their domestic obligations are affecting their careers and rate of advancement.

If you look at the data collected on women’s representation in national science academies in several countries, the numbers of female members in US academies is as low as or lower than some developing countries. These data can be viewed on the Women in Global Science and Technology (WISAT) website – the STI section of the Global Analytical Report of the OWSD-WISAT National Assessments on Gender and STI, www.wisat.org/national-assessments. It also has data on women’s representation as heads of research institutions, where they are available. The OWSD National Chapter in South Africa is currently collecting data on women’s representation in African science academies.

A second issue affecting women’s advancement and success is access to resources: research grants, travel grants, travel to conferences, assistants, etc. Research in South Africa, Brazil and Argentina has

Could you outline your respective roles in the organisation, including your backgrounds and areas of expertise?

XF: I live in China, and have been President of OWSD since 2010. I am a long-term researcher in the fields of S&T developmental strategy and policy. My major contributions are to technological innovation and institutional reform of the Chinese S&T system. I am also a member of the Presidium of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

As President of OWSD, I have the final approval for its strategic decisions and actions. The President presides over the meetings of the General Assembly (made up of OWSD members) and the Executive Board (made up of four vice presidents and four regional members).

TB: I have been Programme Coordinator of OWSD since August 2013. This was a new role created by extra funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) in order to have a fulltime member of staff based at the Organization’s headquarters in Trieste who could develop and implement communications, strategy and fundraising as well as coordinate the current programmes. This includes up to 50 PhD fellowships awarded per year (again through the Sida grant) to women scientists from developing countries and five prizes per year to outstanding women scientists from the least developed countries, sponsored by the Elsevier Foundation.

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THE OWSD EXECUTIVE BOARD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR:

- Setting the time and venue for the meetings of the General Assembly
- Preparing the agenda and the decisions of the General Assembly
- Implementing the decisions taken by the General Assembly
- Deciding on membership applications
- Developing a strategic action plan
- Securing funding for programmes and activities
- Approving programmes and activities, as well as their budgets
- Ensuring that actual spending is in accordance with these budgets
GenderInSITE

Sophia Huyer discusses GenderInSITE, an international campaign aimed at both men and women

GenderInSITE is a multistakeholder global initiative to create greater awareness about the gender dimensions of science, innovation, technology and engineering (SITEI).

The initiative has seen a number of achievements to date. We have established Regional Focal Points in: 1) Latin America with the UNESCO Chair on Women in S&T in Latin America (Argentina), 2) the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAI); and 3) Eastern Africa at UNESCO (Nairobi) with the Africa Network of Science and Technology Institutions (ANSTI). The Latin America RFP has recently signed an agreement with the Argentina Council shown that women’s access to research funding is lower than male researchers’ in sciences, and they tend to be less represented as leaders or principal investigators of research teams. See the National Country Reports of the OWSD-WISAT project for these data.

Sociocultural attitudes do affect women in the developing world differently in that in some regions or countries, it is more difficult for women to travel away from home, either when they are single or married. In some Arab countries, for example, female science students study at national universities, while the males tend to be sent overseas for their education more often. A study of women scientists in East Africa found that less ability to travel for research and international conferences – for reasons of family responsibilities and finances – affected women’s scientific careers (Campion and Shrum, 2004).

How is OWSD encouraging both men and women to participate in the gender equality debate, particularly within the STEM disciplines?

SH: GenderInSITE does this in two ways: 1) by making it a priority to bring men into its programmes and activities, and 2) by looking at impacts and trends in science, innovation, technology and engineering from both male and female perspectives.

For example, we have made it a priority to include men on our governing committee — the male members are Professor Mohamed Hassan, Chair of the InterAcademy Panel, Professor Romain Murenzi, Executive Director of TWAS, and Professor Geoffrey Oldham, Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex. They work with our co-Chairs, Professor Xin Fang and Dr Shirley Malcom (AAAS and Gender Advisory Board) and other members from the Africa Centre for Technology Studies, Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Elsevier Foundation. At recent workshops on gender mainstreaming in science journalism with SciDev.Net, we discussed the relations between science and men, as well as how to understand the differential impacts on women and men of S&T — with an almost equal distribution of both genders. Similarly, an upcoming workshop at SPRU will engage both female and male experts and researchers, with an almost equal gender balance.

for Research on Science and Technology (CONICET) to co-coordinate a research grant programme in gender, science and technology. The current focus areas are:

- Women’s educational and professional careers in engineering
- Gender differences in use and appropriation of ICT by youth
- Gender representation in decision making of S&T policies

They have also convened a regional Advisory Committee on Gender, Science and Technology which includes representatives of CONICET in Argentina, the Organization of American States (OAS), UNESCO, and the InterAmerican Network of Science Academies (IANAS). Women for Science Working Group (WfS-WG), among others.

What inspiring activities are currently taking place at OWSD’s South Africa National Chapter?

DN: The OWSD South Africa National Chapter is producing two important books on the profiling of women scientists. The first will chronicle the career pathways of young scientists (both women and men) in South Africa and select African countries with the aim of inspiring young girls and boys to take up a science career. The second will chronicle the journeys of South African young women scientists who are moving up the career ladder, and select current women PhD students, providing stories on the challenges these young women have faced so far – and so inspire future science leaders of South Africa.

The Chapter is also spearheading a project on the collection of gender disaggregated data within science academies who are members of IAP – the global network of science academies. This will be the first ever comprehensive survey on science academies. The results will be presented at the IAP General Assembly in February 2016 in South Africa.

Furthermore, the Chapter is committed to supporting capacity building efforts geared at OWSD postgraduate fellowship holders, the majority of whom are based in South Africa. As such, it will host an annual training workshop on scientific writing and science communication.

Does OWSD have any ambitious or exciting plans for 2015?

TW: OWSD is hoping to double the number of fellowships we can award, from 50 to 100 per year – so we must get new funders on board! The launch of the new website will ensure OWSD is much more visible, and will link our members and showcase all the amazing work they are doing. It will also ensure that members are able to network in such a way that stimulates national, regional and inter-regional groups and brings together crossdisciplinary research teams. In addition, we are hoping to set up a mentoring scheme whereby successful OWSD fellows and prize winners mentor onsite PhD fellows, and an online writing buddy scheme.

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