Letter from Jean Martensen to Mildred Persinger, January 26, 1977 and Previous Letter from Mildred Persinger to Jean Martensen, December 15, 1976

Jean Martensen

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Mildred Persinger

20 rue Adrien Jeandin
1226 Thonex
Geneva, Switzerland

January 26, 1977

Dear Mildred Persinger:

It was good to hear from you. I welcome your interest and your willingness to put me in touch with Anne Walker upon her return, which, (according to your December letter), should be very soon.

Your particular concern for migrant women is one I share since I worked with Chicano farm workers in California and transient Appalachian adults in Ohio.

You would be interested in the reaction to the film "I am always a Stranger to Someone" (produced in 1975 by the World Council of Churches) which attempts to compare and contrast the problems of foreign women in Geneva, relative to economic status. Interviews with wives of international executives are juxtaposed with interviews with Spanish working class women. Unfortunately, discussion following the showing of the film at the Ecumenical Center produced exactly the kind of sentiments you alluded to in your letter—total lack of sympathy for the privileged—who, in turn, became first defensive and eventually somewhat hostile at the anger of the more vocal working women. Sad to see rehash of exchanges I heard in 1954 and 5 following the publication of Friedan's The Feminine Mystique. Global sisterhood will require more creative imaginings and identifying capacities, more attentive listening, and more thorough economic analyses than we have thus far been able to muster, I.W.Y. notwithstanding.

The enclosed article by Connie Parvey alludes to a variation of the same theme as it surfaced at the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The closing paragraph, in particular, shows the inseparability of women's struggles—for themselves at whatever strata of society and all the dispossessed—if a more just world is to be realized.

Recent conversations with women working at the various U.N. agencies reveal a high degree of interest in my proposed research topic. Inasmuch as the implications of such research could ultimately affect the international work force here in Geneva (and thereby their policies and programs as well), my hunches generally confirmed by staff at W.H.O. and I.L.O. and the undertaking warmly supported.

There are women such as those you mentioned in your letter, who are all too happy to accompany their husbands on diplomatic missions. There are others—less well known—who are giving up their "wives' allowances" and making familial sacrifices in order not to jeopardize their own potential contributions to their home countries upon their return. I refer to a doctor who found it necessary to spend four to five months in her country of origin in order to insure her place. She now is a hospital administrator, a model (along with her husband) to her children, and alternative to the hostess-wife role which most women feel is the only role they can play in diplomatic circles. It seems to me that such examples need to be documented as they represent...
examples of women who value themselves as opposed to the privileges and status accorded them as wives of diplomats or international executives. These women are not merely content to talk of a more egalitarian world; they are willing to challenge the values and mores of the circles they inhabit in order to participate in the realization process of that world.

You were right in saying, "What a good time we could have talking." Letters are not adequate vehicles to describe the envisioned research-action project that I have in mind. One last request—inasmuch as one phase of the entire project will be the published results, could you tell me whether or not there are funds available for projects resulting from IVY? And if so, how one might apply for them?

I passed on your greetings to Kitty Strong and relay hers to You—
Best Wishes for an Exciting, Productive New Year. I look forward to hearing from Anne Walker as well as yourself. Leads, suggestions, all kinds of assistance gratefully accepted...

Always,

Jean Martensen
Dear Jean Martensen,

Your letter, which I found most interesting, arrived while my husband and I were on a belated vacation (due to my activity, not his). I am sorry you have waited so long for a reply, and hope you will be tolerant and not complain to Kitty!

Unfortunately, I am hastening to answer, before doing the work to give you a substantive response. I have to try to remember who the diplomatic wife was who came to Mexico to get people stirred up about the unfairness of not permitting such spouses to work in their own professions while accompanying their husbands on state missions. There is, of course, a different dimension in different economic situations. I know there has been some work done on the situation of women migrants and wives of migrants. Ruud von Mugevest might know. A call to the High Commissioner for Refugees could be fruitful. And what about the woman of Lesotho who have the privilege of building schools and roads while their husbands work in South African mines, returning only every two years?

I have no qualifications for judging the merit of your inquiry, but it seems to me that the questions you raise are only peripherally related to the situation these women find themselves in and are really basic to the cultural patterns surrounding being female in most societies. Most of the people we are in touch with through the project described in the attached, would have little sympathy for the women who are able to stay at home caring for their children, knowing they will be fed, clothed and educated. But you and I know that each level of development brings new striving for equality...or mastery.

The reference you make to neglect of children bears some scrutiny. Neglect by the father? What about the role-model their servant-mothers offer?

What a good time we could have talking. But I do think you need a lot more than you have indicated to frame a worth-while piece of research. I will ask Anne Walker for her help when she returns from a two-month leave, and we will try to get some references for you. In other words, this is no
help, just to show good will. You will hear from us.

Meanwhile, very best wishes for the holidays and the New Year. If you see Kitty, please tell her a letter is on the way.

Sincerely,

Mildred Persinger
Mrs. Richard Persinger  
c/o IVY Tribune  
U.G.O. Office - Room 815  
315 East 46th St.  
New York, New York, 10017

Dear Mrs. Persinger:

I am writing to you on the recommendation of Kitty Strong. She felt that you might be interested in my graduate program while I, at the same time, might profit from your suggestions of people to contact with comparable concerns. On the strength of a proposal to do "participatory research" with and about women in Geneva, specifically those coming as "wives" of international executives in the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation, I was accepted by the Union Graduate School at Yellow Springs, Ohio, in September of this year. I will conduct a self-directed (PhD) program here in Geneva, utilizing resources as I am able in conjunction with my committee in the States.

While I have formulated several key research questions, my primary concern is with the 133 women mentioned above. Present structures and role expectations permit us to see and to know each other in very limited ways. Full and part-time work or study involve some of us. How many? Who among us? Why? What are the stresses on family life? How do our personal-cultural values affect our "adjustment"? What difference did International Women's Year make in our lives? Given the high global consciousness present among women at the Ecumenical Center coupled with a Judeo-Christian tradition which stresses responsibility and service—which is further intensified by IVY which calls women everywhere to break out of restrictive, unjust structures in order to participate in a transformation of the world's values, what happens to uprooted women who live as "internationals"? In Geneva, in 1976, this category means, at least initially, women who are denied continuity in their work and participation in the political and educational spheres of society, and who assume nearly total parenting responsibilities in the absence of traveling husbands.

Dr. Martin Sartorius, Director of Mental Health of WHO, has validated my hunch that little documentation exists on the impact of international living on women. Furthermore, he believes that children are often neglected in this heady, fast-paced but a bit unhinged existence. He supports the study/action/project. Over the past seven months eight women from the center have developed a series of questions covering every aspect of our daily reality—family, friends, community, language, work, education, health, housing, money, life styles, global concerns, cultural dislocation, etc. We foresee using the questions as guides in interviewing and sharing among the larger group of 133. Differences in cultural values and the multiplicity of languages (there are thirty-six nationalities among us) will pose some difficulties. Moreover, should Dr. Sartorius feel that WHO would be interested in participating, there might be an additional sample to be made among the U.N. community. Eventually we hope to raise funds for the printing of our results.

This is longer than I intended. I look forward to hearing from you.  
cc. Kitty Strong