

# THE WORLD'S WOMEN UNITE IN DIVERSITY



Credit: Sylvia Spring

## *Janice Wood Wetzel*

*L'auteur présente un aperçu des conférences officielles et non officielles à Mexico, Copenhague et Nairobi pour la Décennie de la Femme. Utilisant une perspective féministe, elle présente sa critique du processus historique qui la conduit à prédire que la fin de la*

*Décennie marque le début d'un mouvement international de la femme jusqu'ici unique au monde. Elle base ses conclusions sur l'unité vécue au Forum '85, la conférence non officielle de Nairobi. Les questions autour desquelles les 11,000 déléguées se sont unies*

*sont décrites: entre autres, les systèmes patriarcaux, le travail de la femme, la violence, l'exploitation sexuelle, la santé et l'éducation. L'auteur note que "le scénario change de culture en culture, mais que la trame demeure la même."*

Much has been written by many concerning the UN Decade for Women Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in July of 1985. Most of the reports have focussed on the official governmental meeting, with occasional colorful forays into Forum '85, the non-governmental organizations' peripheral conference. There has been an essential perspective missing from the scene – a view that suggests that the sideshow may have been the main event, a kind of participatory community theater that promises to play to standing-room-only crowds for decades to come. I suggest that what happened at Forum '85, in contrast to the official governmental conference, is worthy of concentrated attention. The implications are far-reaching as it becomes clear that the women of the world are united in their intent and perception. The official governments of the world, by contrast, stand out in bas-relief against a backdrop of obfuscation and rhetoric. The United States is the leading player, the protagonist in what would be an international farce were it not so deadly serious. To clarify my critique, let me first provide some historical background information.

In 1972, the United Nations proclaimed 1975 an International Women's Year to be held in Mexico City. At that initial conference, a document called "The Declaration of Mexico, 1975" was drawn up by an informal working group of the non-aligned countries. In a revolutionary statement, the declaration began by recognizing the oppression of all women everywhere, linking oppression with inequality experienced globally by women; with underdevelopment due to unsuitable national structures, as well as a profoundly unjust world economic system; and the absence of rights concerning women in family matters in regard to choosing whether or not to marry or to have children; and mandating the elimination of violence against women such as rape, incest, forced prostitution, physical assault, mental cruelty, and coercive and commercial marital transactions. Men were called upon to participate more responsibly, actively and creatively in family life.

This landmark document was adopted together with a "World Plan of Action" by majority vote, to be implemented by each nation. As a result, 90% of the world's governments today have some sort of

organization promoting women's advancement. But the reality is that few have acted upon, much less implemented, any part of Mexico City's declarations or plans. The United States funded its own International Women's Year in 1977, culminating in a national conference in Houston, but the dozens of proposals that resulted were not taken seriously. A Mid-Decade international conference for women held in Copenhagen in 1980 produced yet another document (similar to Mexico City's) called the "Programme of Action." The United States government voted against the Programme, and there was no national follow-up. President Carter did forward the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" to the Senate for ratification. This is a declaration endorsed by 51 nations, pledging a commitment by the signer nations to move toward full equality for women within their nation states. The Senate has never taken action. Still, one could not say that the U.S. government has ignored the outcomes of these conferences. Far from it. And here is where the real story begins to take shape.

At the end of 1984 when the United States withdrew from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the government was determined to achieve the self-declared goal "to restore American leadership" in all international organizations, the UN and its affiliates in particular. In February 1985, in preparation for the end of the Decade of Women conference to be held in Nairobi, a policy paper prepared by the Washington-based right wing "think tank," the Heritage Foundation, urged the Reagan administration to use its political and economic clout to influence the outcome, steering the conference away from issues that had pervaded the two previous international women's events. They were advised to threaten withdrawal from both participation and financing, the latter estimated at about 25% of the total budget.

Particularly nervous about the non-governmental organization meeting, Forum '85, they dubbed the NGO participants "extremists and anti-American." The following was proposed:

- to apply pressure on the Kenyan government to deny visas to those considered to be most radical;



*Credit: Sylvia Spring*

- to use hotel space allocation to keep small the number of delegates who are "potentially troublesome;"
- to offer to reimburse the Kenyan government for the cost of hosting Forum '85;
- to "help prepare" top Kenyan conference officials.

In response to queries, the United States has dismissed the Heritage paper as irrelevant to Reagan administration policies. Yet those of us who attended the conference were struck by the parallel between the proposals and the outcome. Anecdotes abound on each count by U.S. participants who had no knowledge of the Heritage Foundation. The world's presses reported daily the threat of walk-out and other ploys used by the U.S. to dominate the official conference, including a demand for consensus, rather than majority vote – thus blocking adoption of recommendations passed at the beginning and middle of the decade. Some issues were based on differing ideologies and their impact on women, such as Zionism and apartheid; others concerned women's economic equality, such as the principle called comparable worth. The fact is that the U.S. was the only government in the world to vote against that principle, thus eliminating it from the docket due to lack of consensus. Our group of 100, the first in the world to register, paid in full, were put out of three hotels and sent to a campus 20 miles away (formerly an internment camp for Mau Mau revolutionaries). There were spartan accommodations, no telephone, newspapers or other communications, and extremely limited bus service to the Forum. To my mind, the Heritage Foundation is alive and powerful. But there are other facts as well.

The official conference must be viewed realistically. It is a meeting dominated by the men of the world who are in power. Out of 18 people presented on the opening dais at the official plenary, only four were women. In one country, only men were delegates. In ours, one man, Alan Keyes (the U.S. Representative on the UN Economic and Social Council) and Maureen Reagan (the President's daughter) were the only two delegates allowed to speak. But in all countries, delegates are selected by their leaders because their ideology is congruent. Should it in any way differ, they are not allowed to say so. The official conference is programmed to be sure. That an

ideological forward-looking global agenda for women was consensually agreed upon at that meeting is to their credit, whether or not the world's governments again choose to ignore the document. But the indirect impact of the Decade of Women's unofficial NGO conference, Forum '85, has proven to be even more phenomenal. It is no wonder that governments are threatened. This meeting was *real*, not just ideological posturing.

To attend Forum '85 was to experience an extraordinary event. Eleven thousand women from over 150 countries came together at Nairobi University in a very literal sense. Unlike the previous international meetings, both official and unofficial, this one was marked by unity. Women gathered in Asian kimonos, in Indian saris, African khangas and Arabic chadors and veils. They were joined by colorful Latinos as well as relatively bland Europeans and North Americans. Fifty percent were black Africans and 30 percent were Asians. There were indigenous women who spoke only Swahili, middle-class professionals, religious sisters, the able bodied and physically impaired. There were punk youth, elite intelligentsia, the politically astute, the apolitical, articulate orators, quiet-spoken poets and silent meditators. The women of the left and right from both rural and urban communities were represented well. From youth to old age – black, brown, red, yellow, white and all the shades between – came together to discuss in 1000 formal workshops (and I daresay probably one billion informal conversations) the issues that confront women everywhere.

By the third day, preconceived expectations of hostile confrontations dissipated. The word began to spread of the unity present among the women – acknowledged between workshops at breaks in the quadrangle, at small tables at lunch in the cafeteria, waiting in lines, on busses, sipping tea at the nearby Norfolk Hotel. Then unity became part of the dialogue of workshop participants and presenters alike, of Betty Friedan's following under the Fig Tree, and finally reported in the daily conference paper, *The Forum*. Journalists called their publishers excitedly. The typical response was "Yes, but isn't there anything *sensational*?" "This is *sensational*!" they replied. Too often the real historic message went unpublished – invisible and unsung, true to cliché. Despite differing ideology, geography,

race, culture, color, or age; despite their national differences that would polarize the delegates at the official conference, these women were in agreement concerning the situation of women in the world. They stood united in diversity.

The Reagan government disallowed a final plenary at Forum '85. The administration had the power to disallow as well a formal agenda or final document. Despite these constraints, the unifying issues emerged. At an informal "plenary" spontaneously called by the women of a dozen countries, the issues were highlighted by one speaker after another. It would seem that the declaration that was conceived in Mexico City in 1975 had gone through a 10 year melding process. Mexico City has been called "the greatest consciousness raising event in history." Copenhagen, with all its apparent conflict, set in motion the most intricate mechanism of women ever recorded. Women began to realize that *collective action* was the key to their power and effectiveness. Solidarity links forged over the decade have turned out to be stronger bonds than ever imagined. Forum '85 is just the beginning of an unbreakable chain of women throughout the world dedicated to healing and liberating themselves, their children, and in turn their men and their nations.

The women of the world in large numbers appear to agree:

- that women's universal oppression and inequality are grounded in the patriarchal systems that ensure the continuance of female subservience and secondary status everywhere;
- that women do 2/3 of the world's work, yet 2/3 of the world's women live in poverty. Their work usually is unpaid, underpaid and invisible. Their fiscal dependency is perpetuated despite the fact that they do almost all of the world's domestic work plus working outside the home and growing 1/2 of the world's food;
- that women are the peace makers, yet war takes its heaviest toll on them as they hold their families intact, struggling for physical safety and sustenance;
- that there is universal sexual exploitation of girls and women, often resulting in sexual domination and abuse throughout their lives;
- that women provide more health care (both physical and emotional)

than all the world's health services combined; that they are the chief proponents of the prevention of illness and the promotion of health. Yet they have fewer health care services, are likely to experience chronic exhaustion due to overwork, and to be deprived emotionally and physically by their men, their families, their communities and their governments;

- that women are the chief educators of the family, yet outnumber men among the world's illiterates at a ratio of 3:2; that even when educated, they generally are not allowed to lead.

The scenario shifts culture by culture, but the story line remains the same. The common condition of women must be changed. And with such change will come a more humane world.

There was a general sense of agreement at the informal "plenary" that the three-pronged purpose of the Decade for Women - Equality, Development, and Peace - would never come to be without

mutuality and justice. The restructuring of society - the recognition of and full compensation for women's work and men's equal sharing of family responsibility and commitment, once derided notions relegated to avant garde feminist ideology - have emerged as basic universal mandates among vast numbers of seemingly disparate women of all cultures. Many women take great risks when they stand up to be counted. Some risk abuse, even torture, within the family; others risk governmental abuse and imprisonment. The courage of these women is remarkable and is in proportion to the seriousness with which they weigh their situations. By way of example, church representatives asked us to come home and report the fact that Kenyan women who spoke out were threatened with imprisonment. Their pictures were taken when they did so in Nairobi. (That I can attest to). It is hoped that publicity will lessen the likelihood of repercussion.

The governments of the world may continue to ignore women's documents. They may continue to disallow those

events that they can't control. Still the work will go on in rural villages and urban settings, in remote corners of the earth and in highly populated regions. The momentum is there. The commitment is firm. The global connections are in place. Prediction: the end of the Decade of Women marks the beginning of an international women's movement the world has yet to experience. The women of the world are organizing. They are thinking and communicating and supporting one another. They have seen themselves mirrored in the faces of their sisters. I haven't felt this hopeful for women and for the world - ever.

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