

BEFORE AND AFTER NAIROBI

Doris Anderson

Just prior to her departure for Nairobi as a member of Canada's official delegation, Doris Anderson wrote a column (reprinted below) for The Toronto Star in which she expressed her expectations of the conference. After her return, we asked her to write a piece for us describing the extent to which those optimistic expectations had been realized.

Avant son départ pour Nairobi à titre de membre de la délégation officielle canadienne, Doris Anderson a écrit un bref (imprimé ci-dessous) pour le Toronto Star dans lequel elle exprime ses attentes de la conférence. Après son retour, nous lui avons demandé de rédiger un aperçu décrivant jusqu'à quel point ses attentes optimistes s'étaient réalisées.

I WANT NOTHING LESS THAN A MIRACLE FROM NAIROBI*

By the time you read this, I will be in Nairobi, Kenya, at the United Nations world conference on women. I'm hoping for the answer to a riddle – and for nothing less than a miracle.

At the first United Nations conference, in Mexico in 1975, women from all over the world discovered they shared a multitude of problems – and that feminism wasn't a western women's fad. Naively, we believed that all we had to do was document all the inequalities and the facts would speak so eloquently that governments would have to make changes.

We were wiser when we met in Copenhagen in 1980. We started building bridges – networking, we called it. Nairobi is our last chance to make the miracle happen and solve the riddle we have been struggling with for most of our lives.

On the surface, the problems are daunting. What can I say to a woman from

Chad who lives on \$113 a year and can expect to die at 42? Or a woman from Pakistan, where only one woman in three learns to read? Or a woman from Senegal whose daughter, if she is raped, can be killed by her male relatives because she has lost her market value as a bride?

But we will come together knowing we share far more common problems, despite our language and skin color, than we can find differences. And for the first time in history, the movement for change in women's status is worldwide.

The first problem all women are concerned with is the changing family. A common myth in Canada is that the family is fine and flourishing everywhere except in North America, where women "have abandoned their traditional role." But the family unit is changing dramatically all over the world.

In one-quarter to one-third of all families worldwide, women are the sole breadwinners and their number is increasing. A woman who is head of a family has three jobs and works 18-hour days. She raises the family's food (80 per cent of Third World farming is done by women). She does all the household work – pounds grain for flour, hauls water, cooks, cleans, etc. And she has a baby every year. According to this year's *A World Survey* by Ruth Leger Sivard, for the United Nations, divorces have tripled between 1960 and 1980.

The only place where the family is making gains is in Iran. But at what cost?

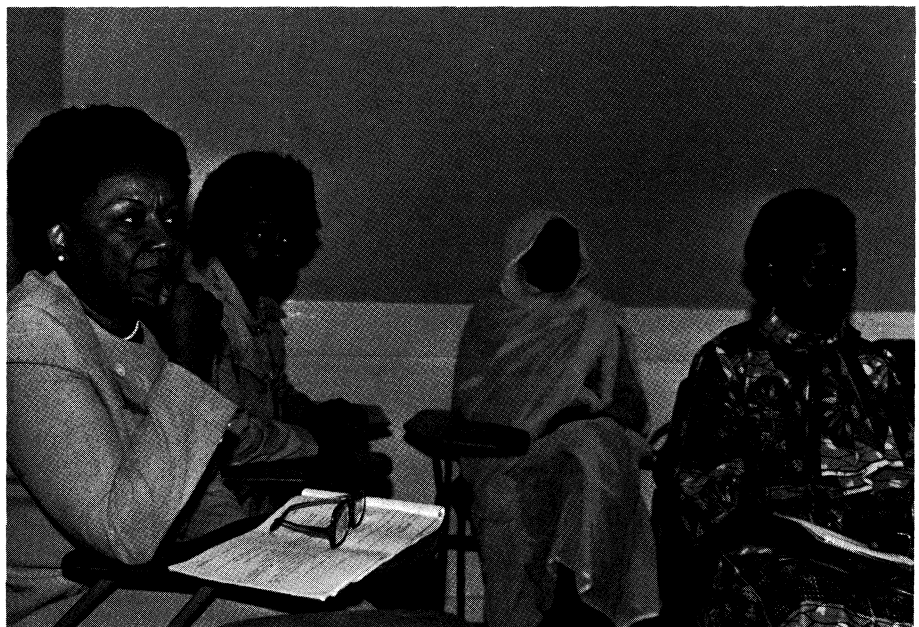
A man can have several wives – and divorce any of them without cause any time he wants. A woman can't even go out to shop without an escort. If she is caught owning – let alone reading – a classic such as *Madame Bovary*, she can be executed. (If she is a virgin, she must be raped by a judge first. Virgins can't be executed).

The second big worldwide problem women share is the feminization of poverty. And a lot of the aid we in North America send to the Third World is hurting, not helping. Modern machinery for agriculture often goes to produce export crops, but robs the people of food-producing land. Young women do get some of the jobs opening up in multinational factories, but only because they are cheaper to hire than men and can be laid off easily when they become pregnant.

A third common dilemma women share is the fact we are the half of the race that bears children. Better medical care has cut infant mortality in the Third World dramatically – in fact, so dramatically the total number of people who have lived on this Earth from the dawn of history has doubled in the last 40 years.

But birth control and abortion to control such unprecedented growth is forbidden by church and state in many countries. U.S. President Ronald Reagan didn't help last year when he threatened to cut off aid to countries that promoted birth control.

The final big problem all women in the world share is our relative powerlessness



Forum '85 Workshop Participants

Credit: Ann Meredith



Green Belt Women's Dramatization of their Work

Credit: Sylvia Spring

where it counts – in politics and the way money is spent in our countries. Even in advanced democracies like Norway and Finland, women make up only one-third of the legislatures. In Canada, until the last election, women were outnumbered 20 to one. (Now it's only 10 to one.)

At the close of the conference in Nairobi, all countries will sign new pledges – as they did in Copenhagen and Mexico. Will the pledges change anything? Canada signed the convention to ratify equal pay for work of equal value long ago, but it still isn't law in most of this country, including Ontario.

The last problem the women who gather in Nairobi will have to tackle is how to persuade our various societies that what women want – decent care, housing, food opportunity for everyone and a peaceful world – is for the benefit of everyone, not just women.

The facts are: there is a link between women's advancement and social progress. When women are better informed and educated, the family is healthier and better off. When women are given training and skills, the nation's productivity and economy grows. What is good for women, it seems, is also good for society.

The miracle I hope for in Nairobi is that women, with our increased sophistication and skills, will break through institutional barriers and outmoded social structures to find new ways, by combining our knowledge, to help one another – and the societies we live in.

That is the miracle. And the riddle? The riddle is: Why has it taken so long?

NO BIG MIRACLE – BUT THERE WERE TRIUMPHS

Back home in Canada, as I finger a small peace symbol carved from Kenyan stone, and contemplate the pounds of paper and resolutions from the Nairobi conference, I try to assess what came of all of our bright hopes for the End of the Decade Conference on Women. And my conclusion has to be that certainly no big miracle – as I had hoped for – happened. That was too much to hope for. But there were triumphs – both big and small. And the riddle that exasperates us all: 'why has it taken so long to bring about the changes we know will benefit women so much?' is becoming easier – not to accept – but to understand. Some of the most important legislative gains actually proceeded the conference. Faced with the deadline in July many gov-

ernments got busy and passed important legislation. Canada finally got a bill through restoring rights to native women. Australia set up a new department with a cabinet minister to look after the status of women, etc.

A major stunning triumph was the cliff hanger finish at 4:30 a.m. on the very last day of the conference. Miraculously, after all the bickering, one hundred and fifty-five nations adopted, by consensus, the final document. Its resolutions will carry women to the year 2000 with changes proposed for equality, better health, employment opportunities, child care, etc.

It's obvious that no international agreement automatically becomes national law, whether you live in Chili, Chad or Canada. But the fact that our government signed the agreement can be an important tool to be used by women's groups in the future.

Another major triumph was the central role Canada played. We had a skilled team headed by Maureen O'Neil and Julie Loranger, and they were able to influence the conference at several crucial points. They performed with finesse, and we looked classy. What was most frustrating to the delegates in the official party, was

the United Nations internal politics which impedes all international conferences. One-sixth of the nearly 400 paragraphs in the Forward-Looking Strategies Document couldn't be resolved, booby trapped as they were with explosive terms such as "Palestinian women," "Zionism" and "imperialism."

A tiny concession by one faction to change "poverty to "severe poverty" might open the way for a modification somewhere else. Here we were, surrounded by knowledgeable women from all over the world, all bursting with information to share with one another – and we had so little time. Sometimes I felt I was trapped in my own personal nightmare – a world-wide convention of copy editors! In the plenary session where each nation reported on the progress that had been made for women, some nations used the time instead to wage political war on their enemies, blatantly lying about the condition of women.

We coped the way women always cope. We did what we were there for. We dutifully worked in the committees and the plenary sessions. The rest of the time we worked around, over and under the creaking United Nations system. We met other women for informal "Conversations" which had been arranged by Status of Women Canada, in snatches of time when we could get away from the formal work. And we made other contacts at breakfast, or over lunch or in the corridors outside of committee rooms. And the miracle did happen. They were the sparks ignited when two women exchanged information and recognized new solutions to old and common problems. Swedish women explained how affirmative action is being enforced in their country. A Kenyan woman described how her grassroots co-operative makes and sells honey, pulling the village women out of their traditional poverty. A New Zealand woman explained the strategy that persuaded her government to reject the Cruise missile and refuse harbour space to any ship carrying nuclear weapons. Norwegian women told how pornography was being regulated.

We exchanged addresses, promised to send each other books and more information. We danced and sang in spontaneous happenings at the Forum, which was the other conference run by women themselves – the "unofficial conference." And



FROM THE GLOBE OUTSIDE THE
PEACE TENT...

NAIROBI, KENYA, 1985

Credit: International Women's Tribune Centre

we promised to meet again. Would it do any good if we did?

Some nations, like the U.S.S.R., want another world conference in the year 2000. Some, like France and the East European nations, want a review to be set up every five years, and permanent machinery to be set up at the United Nations itself. Some countries want more frequent regional conferences. Some want conferences on more specific topics such as health or agriculture with the emphasis on women's concerns.

Nobody was under any illusion that the problems of women have been solved. Few governments are so unaware that they believe that, now women have had "their decade," women's concerns can be forgotten.

Even the most traditional governments are beginning to realize that we are all engaged in an on-going revolution. It's a

revolution that is at least as important – if not more important in its implications – than the Industrial Revolution, because the problems of women are the problems of all of society. The riddle, then, is how to make that clearer to the men who still have most of the power in almost every country – and certainly in Nairobi.

**This column is reprinted with permission from The Toronto Star (13 July 1985).*

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