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A View from Nairobi

By Mary Ward Day

Nairobi—a city of glaring contrasts, of wealth and poverty, of multistoried office buildings and vendors' one-room shacks, of Mercedes-Benzes and barefoot panhandlers, a city that boasts cross-cultural harmony in the mix of its nearly one million African, Arab, Asian and European inhabitants—is used to planeloads of tourists. But not to the thousands of women from more than 150 countries who descended on it en masse for the United Nations World Conference on Women in July. It was reportedly the largest gathering of women in our present century.

The purpose of the conference was to review and appraise progress achieved and obstacles encountered in realizing the goals and objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women—namely, equality, development and peace—and to propose strategies for the advancement of women to the year 2000.

About 15,000 strong—13,000 for an unofficial pre-conference, 2,000 for the official U.N. gathering—the participants added to the exuberance of this lively Kenyan capital. Not to mention adding to the exuberance of the already crowded sidewalks, streets, cafes and tearooms. But for some of the women, problems of logistics turned into an unexpected nightmare.

The campus of the University of Nairobi and the Kenyatta International Conference Center served as gathering points for women from North, South, East and West as they communicated "sisterhood" across cultural, racial and language barriers.

There were differences of opinion, ideology, culture and politics. But despite

the differences, efforts were made to dialogue and seek understanding and reconciliation.

"I came to find out about the problems of women in other countries, to put in perspective the problems of women in my country, to establish networks, to listen, to learn," said one participant. Similar thoughts were expressed by hundreds more in and outside the conference halls.

Who were these women and what did they represent? They were grassroots persons, policymakers, youth, the aged, the disabled, professional women, those who till the soil and urban women, housewives and scholars.

This end of decade Nairobi conference was preceded by two other conferences sponsored by the United Nations and spearheaded by the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. The first conference was held in 1975 in Mexico City, and the second in 1980 in Copenhagen.

As was the case with the previous two conferences, the Nairobi meeting consisted of two overlapping conferences, the larger Non-Governmental conference (NGO Forum) and the smaller U.N. conference for government-sponsored delegates. The 13,000 NGO Forum attendees came as members of various organizations or as individuals interested or involved in women's development. Although they had no decision-making powers, they played a significant role as agents of influence for social change.

The NGO Forum consisted of 1,000 pre-planned workshops covering a wide range of issues and perspectives on the main theme of the decade. There was discussion, debate, exchange of ideas and experiences, assessment of activities already undertaken, and planning for action. Consideration was given to day-to-day survival issues: clean water, food, basic health needs, exploitation, violence, war, disarmament, apartheid, the plight of refugee and migrant women, and human rights violations.

Quality of life issues were also an area of focus: infant and maternal health, family planning, literacy, the economics of aging, the problems of rural women, the placing of an economic value of the work of homemakers, polygamy, and the "feminization of poverty."

Constitutional and legal issues were another component of the workshops: discriminatory laws; legal rights regarding land, marriage, family, labor; the need to institutionalize women's studies and the

link between research and women's studies.

Two of the NGO workshops were sponsored by the Program of Continuing Education of the Howard University School of Social Work. The first, "The Role of Kenyan and Black American Professional Women Who Are Mothers," was led by Harriette P. McAdoo of the School of Social Work faculty, and Miriam Were, a faculty member at the University of Nairobi Medical School. The other workshop, "The Building of Identity in African and Black American Women," was led by Patricia Dunston, also on the faculty of the School of Social Work, and two alumnae of the school who are now working in Africa: Lorna Nganga, who is with the Department of Justice in Nairobi, and Arlene Enabulele, a research associate at the University of Benin, in Nigeria.

The combination of Forum workshops and other cultural activities that took place on the campus of the University of Nairobi made for an atmosphere of intellectual excitement and cross-cultural enrichment. At the same time, though, one could not escape the tension, conflict, confusion, concern, frustration and alienation due to national, cultural, economic and political differences.

Some NGO Forum delegates served in consultative status with the U.N. and were able to attend the official government-sponsored conference as observers or speakers. Thus, they served as a link between the Forum and the official delegation, communicating issues and positions emanating from the Forum.

The official U.N. conference was, in fact, an intergovernmental meeting attended by more than 2,000 delegates representing various governments. The American delegation, for example, was headed by Maureen Reagan, while Margaret Kenyatta, daughter of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, was the head delegate of the host country.

Several major documents provided the agenda for this meeting. Included among these was the "State of the World's Women Report 1985". This Report summarizes the results of a study to ascertain progress achieved in the realization of the goals and objectives of the Decade for Women. The research sample included U.N. member governments of whom more than three quarters were respondents to the survey. Findings of the survey indicate that, despite unevenness of gains in various sectors of the world, some distinct advances have been made. Most of the world's governments have

incorporated the principle of equality of men and women in their constitutions.

A milestone in the struggle to achieve equal political, social and economic rights for women has been the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women by 80 nations. Thus, a majority of countries have established constitutional and legal equality between men and women. A number of countries now have official structures to promote and monitor the progress of women.

There also is evidence that gains have been made in the areas of education and employment, health and family planning, and in political participation. Female illiteracy is decreasing as well as the legal obstacles to equal access to education. Though in many parts of the world the illiteracy and school drop-out rate among women is still higher than that of men, the gap is closing between the percentage of girls and boys enrolled in primary schools.

While a world recession has affected women's participation in the labor market, and rural women still suffer disproportionately from poverty, the number of countries that have passed equal pay laws has tripled since the Mexico City conference 10 years ago. Women have also benefited from initiatives launched by the World Health Organization—such as primary health care, maternal and child health programs, education for family planning, nutrition, safe water and better sanitation thrusts. These measures both improve women's health as well as reduce their workload.

In politics, even though the momentum is slow, women are making gains in some countries. An important contribution to the decade was the establishment by the U.N. of an International Research Institute that provides global information on the situation of women.

But, despite laws to the contrary, fundamental problems of inequality, discrimination and the position of marginal status continue as obstacles to the advancement of women. Based on responses to the world survey and the opinions of women in attendance at the Nairobi conference, the reasons for these problems are complex: (1) the prevailing stereotypic attitudes which are rooted in social, religious and cultural traditions, (2) the under-valued status accorded women's vital societal role as wife and mother, (3) the virtual lack of participation of women at most levels of decision-making and planning, (4) the arms race which depletes human and economic

resources needed for development, (5) the precarious position of women and children living under emergency situations. (See "U.N. Decade for Women Special Bulletin No. 11," July 1985, pp. 6-10.)

Looking beyond the decade, the conference delegates turned their attention to another major agenda item, a document of "Forward Looking Strategies" drafted by the preparatory body of the conference. These strategies were developed within the context of the goals of the decade, in consideration of the



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nature of the obstacles encountered in achieving the goals and within the context of global trends such as the international economic crisis, industrialization, mechanization, urbanization and the increase in female-headed households. Without appropriate government response, these proposed strategies could have a negative impact on the achievements of the decade. The proposed strategies focused attention on "vulnerable and underprivileged" groups of women, such as the rural and urban poor, women who are victims of violence and prostitution and those who are the only sources of support for their families. The document also took into consideration the problems of women in countries still under colonial rule or foreign occupation.

This draft document caused considerable discord and controversy among the delegates. Areas of contention centered on the sections of the document concerning the relationship of Middle East policy (with reference to the plight of Palestinian women), disarmament, and apartheid in South Africa. There were assertions that the conference was being exploited for propaganda purposes, that it was being politicized with issues extraneous to the purpose of the conference. In this regard, Letitia Shahani, the secretary-general of

the U.N. Conference provides a perspective on the question of politics:

"Women are products of their own national situation. If a woman maintains that political issues are extraneous to this conference you know she comes from a country where political rights are practiced, where there is no oppression, where the government is stable. Naturally, she will focus on equal pay for women, equal access to employment, how to combine home and outside work. But, many women come from countries where reality is a bomb, displacement from the homeland, persecution, economic hardship. These are all women's issues. It is crucial, therefore, that the developed countries, the Third World countries and the socialist countries understand their different realities."

In the end, the delegates heeded Secretary-General Shahani's warning to take a balanced view of political issues by permitting the articulation of issues and grievances that concern all of the world's women, while at the same time understanding where they lie in relation to the whole. . . . A global conference necessitating the approval of a global strategy. Following a series of compromises, the delegates adopted unanimously a document of "Forward Looking Strategies" to provide guidelines to broaden and extend advances for the world's 2,400,000,000 women.

Building on the outcomes of the two previous world conferences—consciousness-raising, advocacy, networking—the Nairobi meeting made a significant step toward global sisterhood and an international women's movement. Despite the differences of life situations, goals and expectations, at both the NGO Forum and the official U.N. conference, there appeared to be the establishment of some common ground. Neither the efforts to respect differences and diffuse conflict while searching for commonalities, nor the economic, political and social advances made by women would have been possible without the decade. □

Mary Ward Day is a faculty member and director of the Program of Continuing Education, Howard University School of Social Work. She provided leadership for a continuing education study tour to Nairobi held in collaboration with the events of the U.N. Decade Conference. Twenty individuals, among them faculty members from the School of Social Work, alumni and representatives from the community, accompanied her to Kenya.