

ISSUES AFFECTING AFRICAN WOMEN ARISING AT FORUM '85,
THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL MEETING OF WOMEN - NAIROBI JULY 1985

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FORUM '85, the non-governmental 'World Meeting of Women' which overlapped in Nairobi with the 'World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the U.N. Decade for Women' was the first major opportunity for women from Africa to place on the international agenda, in a public way, their viewpoints, demands and policies on a number of issues affecting the future of the continent. African women formed by far the majority of participants, and for many it was their first journey outside their country and their first ride in a plane. The organizers had made special efforts to enable women without much cash to attend and survive at the Forum. While interpretation was sometimes a problem for speakers of Arabic, Chinese and Russian, there was almost always interpretation into Swahili, enabling the many rural Kenyan and Tanzanian women to take part in the workshops.

This paper does not claim to be a systematic coverage of issues affecting African women, much less a cohesive theoretical approach to African women's role. It is, of necessity, impressionistic, with a few references given for those who wish to follow up debates on these issues, which are ongoing. Forum '85 was a real market-place of ideas, most of them with an activist orientation and while this paper concentrates on Africa there was a great deal of exchange of views with women from other continents, particularly Latin America which shares the debt crisis and the countries of the Indian sub-continent.

The major fora in which discussion took place were the workshops of which over 20 were going on at any one time, most of them on the Campus of the University of Nairobi. In addition there were specialized venues, a Peace Tent for discussion of issues of peace and war, an appropriate technology centre, Tech and Tools, for discussion and demonstration of village level technology, the Karibu Centre run by the Council of Churches where discussions on the role of women in different religious traditions took place, a centre for craftswomen, a cultural centre and a film forum. In addition, large numbers of stalls and displays set up by national or regional organizations gave the university campus a somewhat fair-like atmosphere. With over 15,000 delegates registered it was one of the largest gatherings of its type ever held. A daily newspaper was produced and distributed free to all participants while the Kenyan media also gave considerable coverage to the event.

1. Women and the Global Economic Crisis

The holding of the Forum in Africa inevitably drew attention to contemporary problems facing the continent, prime of which are the food crisis and the debt crisis. Speakers from Africa at workshops on the world economy put forward the view of women as the major victims of policies being urged on African governments by the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.). I.M.F. Conditionalities on loans require governments to cut spending in areas such as public health, education, and other "non-productive" investment. While criticism of the I.M.F. is widespread in Africa (for example that it plays a neo-colonial role in intervening in economic policy decisions of sovereign countries), it was argued strongly at Forum '85 that the direction of this intervention fell more heavily on women than on men due to their particular role in the economy. Thus women were forced to become the "shock absorbers" of the economic crisis, providing by their own labour services which could no longer be provided by the government e.g. water and fuelwood, doing without services e.g. family planning, or earning money to pay for services such as education. In addition women suffer

more than men generally from the depletion of environmental resources which comes about as a result of the policy urging a greater expansion of cash cropping. The World Bank's 1981 report Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa was almost universally condemned as consigning Africa to a disadvantageous position in the world economy, due to the ever falling world prices for Africa's main export commodities, and for making even more difficult for women to move out of highly dependent roles in the economy. The O.A.U.'s Lagos Plan of Action was given more credibility, being based on a form of collective import substitution, seen as offering more for women. Some felt the best organizational framework for regional co-operation might be S.A.D.C.C., and regretted that it had no women's programme.

2. Mistaken Assumptions About the Family

For a number of years now it has been alleged that women are the victims of male bias in the collection of statistics on their contribution to economic development (Fong 1980). Many Forum participants maintained that this has scarcely improved over the decade and has contributed to the persistence of mistaken stereotypes such as that of the male-headed household, the underestimation of women's contribution to agriculture and livestock management and the failure to assign a value to women's work in water and fuelwood gathering which makes a positive contribution to the economy (Dey 1984: 10-15). In the absence of concrete information on the division of labour within the family, the number and relative size of family enterprises and the distribution of income within the family, assumptions tend to be made based on the western (or colonial) view of the family with male breadwinner and provider to the wife and children. This has had many detrimental repercussions for African women ranging from a devaluation of their role in agriculture and the economic contribution of their domestic labour, to their overburdening with extra tasks in the name of 'development' and often the loss of their traditional rights to land. The only way to correct this, according to many participants, is to carry out quite detailed studies of the division of labour, the distribution of income and the allocation of time within the family. Obviously this is the sort of research which needs to be done by women themselves who are culturally attuned to the populations being researched.

3. Women and Agriculture

The famines in several African countries gave particular salience to the issue of women's role in agriculture. Many participants suggested that women had an even greater role in food production now since so many male workers have moved into cash crop production. But women have traditionally played an important role in food production in many African countries, although this has not always been recognized by their governments. Their agriculture has lagged behind that of men in technological innovation, while men have been taught to drive tractors, sent to agricultural colleges and given loans and credits women have, until recently, been left with digging sticks and their own backs to grow traditional crops in untested and unimproved soil. There seems to be a belated realization that training women in agriculture is a very effective way of improving food outputs, particularly in countries where they already are involved in agriculture (Byrne 1984). Several participants also mentioned how crops which are traditional 'women's crops' e.g. cassava, taro and other root crops, are given lower status than 'men's crops' e.g. rice, wheat, maize, yet they are often very well adapted to the climatic conditions and a good way of getting the maximum nutrition from the soil. Some governments are also realizing the necessity of training female agricultural extension workers to work with women and of making available credit and marketing facilities to women.

4. Women and Domestic Labour

Some most interesting debates took place around the issue of domestic labour, in

both Western and Third World societies. In the former case these were influenced by the Selma James 'Wages for Housework' campaign which, while somewhat controversial in its prescriptions, draws attention to the fact that domestic labour (usually of the wife) provides a hidden subsidy to capitalist production (usually of her husband). In third world countries, including Africa, social reproduction including food production often goes on in the subsistence sector (or precapitalist mode of production), relies heavily on womens labour, enables lower wages to be paid in the capitalist sector and thus contributes directly to capitalist profits. Many so-called 'women's projects' in Africa, (as in the Pacific where I have observed them) concentrate on making women's role in domestic labour more productive - often not to save her time or labour but to enable her to do more tasks, including those of income-generating for charges such as school fees for her children. This, of course is an enormous topic and this paper cannot do justice to its ramifications. It is also a most needed area of work for women researchers in Africa to tackle and many of them are aware of this. Unfortunately many of the more traditional women's organizations are not so aware of it and continue to base their activities mainly on women's domestic roles (see also Rogers 1980).

a. Women and Water

Water carrying is generally a female occupation in Africa and there was considerable discussion about how it is, in many areas becoming more difficult as water supplies are further away from village settlements. Despite formal adherence to goals of installing water pumps etc. close to villages many women said they seemed to be of low priority to many governments.

b. Women and Fuelwood

A similar problem is that of fuelwood, collecting it is another traditionally female task. Like water collecting it 'is one of the many tasks straddling productive and domestic labour in which female labour is expropriated by the male head of households' (Armstrong & Garry 1984: 83). Furthermore, in many African countries there is a severe crisis of fuelwood. One response to this has been the "Greenbelt" movement of Kenyan women. Another response is the design of fuel stoves which use much less wood than open fires. Both of these, while useful in themselves, do not attack the problem at its roots and this remains a topic of great contention.

5. Women and Religion

There were strong religious undercurrents in much of the debate. Religious views ranged from those of the "Pro-life" fundamentalist tendencies to the advocates of feminist and liberation theology. For example the World Council of Churches organized a workshop on religious traditions and women's bodily functions which looked at female sexuality in all the books of the monotheistic religions. Egyptian feminist Nawal el Sadawi gave an analysis of the rise of religious fundamentalism in all religious traditions, which she sees as a threat to the gains which women have made and which she interprets as a reaction by patriarchal structures to the uncertainties brought about by the economic crisis.

6. Women and Technology

Village level technology was highlighted at Forum '85 with several displays, workshops and visits to rural areas. Generally women's appropriate technology has been in the area of food preparation for home consumption, however there were some productive technologies on display including bee keeping and other small industries which are being encouraged. Much of the initiative for the Tech and Tools display came from the South Pacific, not Africa and the Forum proved a useful venue for exchange of ideas.

7. Local and National Women's Organizations

The Women's organizations represented at the Forum were of diverse types, ranging from national bodies of highly educated urban middle-class women to local groups of peasant women. One of the questions raised in a workshop I attended was 'can elite women form a united front with peasant women which can work for change despite class differences?' It was a question which did not seem to be satisfactorily answered, yet one which many National Councils of Women etc. probably need to address more carefully and new ways for finding representation for rural women found.

8. The Legal Status of Women

The legal status of women varies considerably throughout the African states. In Zimbabwe a recent law change removed women from the status of minor, dependent on her husband or father (Slapgard 1985). Yet despite legal changes many men and some women are reluctant to recognize the new status, so the fight for equality must still continue.

a. Polygamy and Bride Price

A somewhat related issue is that of Polygamy and Bride Price, both of which are traditional in parts of Africa but in their modernized form have become avenues for further exploitation of women. Polygamy seems to be a very live issue in Kenya and one on which males and females have differing views. For example several plays were on in Nairobi critical of it, yet on a visit to the rural areas we were greeted by a male politician who unashamedly supported it. Zimbabwe and Mozambique have taken much stronger steps to get rid of polygamy and to reduce the exploitative possibilities of bride price, working with women's organizations (Ropa Rinopfuka Mahamba 1984 and Urdang 1984).

9. Women and Education

Women's access to formal education has greatly expanded in recent years in most African countries, and women have been able to take advantage of this to gain entry to a number of professions. Yet there are many questions raised about the nature and quality of this education and the dilemmas it poses for women's role in the economy. For example Claire Robertson (1985: 17) has argued that

The growth of Western-type formal education in Africa has created a new dilemma for women, one in which both their absence and presence in schools acts to their disadvantage. Their absence from schools makes it difficult for them to compete with men for scarce wage jobs. Their presence in primary schools in ever-growing numbers is economically dysfunctional in that it encourages their removal from the labour force both as children and adults and promotes their dependence on men. Education for most women in Africa then, functions as an instrument of oppression to reinforce subordinate roles, rather than leading the way to equality and greater opportunity.

However she cautions that 'one should not conclude from this that formal education should be dispensed with' but rather that 'strong reforms are necessary to change the present functions of that education in most countries' (Robertson 1985: 17).

This seems to be a widely held view and most of the workshops on education at the Forum addressed themselves to this task to varying degrees. There was a great deal of discussion about non-formal education, particularly adult literacy, and several participants gave fascinating accounts of participatory research and cultural action projects carried out among poor women in rural or urban settings. These are based on the methodology of Paulo Freire combined with local cultural realities (see for example Hope & Timmel 1984, Crowley

1985). It was however, somewhat disturbing to hear that some of the most innovative adult education work has been discouraged by local authorities (wa Mirie 1980 & was Thiong'o 1982). Zimbabwe's adult literacy program is spoken of as a great success and involves largely women.

10. Women in Politics

Most African ruling parties have a women's wing which covers rural and urban women of all classes and which functions to mobilize support among female voters for the party's candidates. Yet women remain very under-represented politically in most African countries, even at local government level. When I asked people why these organizations were not used to get more women into elected positions most responded that women would not vote for female candidates and that women had great difficulty in getting pre-selection for this reason. Several women were critical of the role these women's party wings play, singing and dancing on official occasions, and catering for party functions. The few female politicians have had to battle very hard for their seats and work much harder than their male rivals.

11. Women under Apartheid

The venue of the conference in Africa together with the current crisis in South Africa meant that the question of Apartheid was given high priority and at least 10 workshops devoted to different aspects of it. The declaration of the state of emergency by Botha, coming during the conference gave the issue even more prominence. Support for the women of South Africa was a very unifying issue and most government delegations at the U.N. conference also made mention of it in their speeches.

a. Women inside South Africa and Namibia

An unusual aspect of the Forum was the presence of a large delegation of women from inside South Africa at the conference. This delegation was organized by the South African Council of Churches and consisted of members of local organizations, many of them affiliated to the United Democratic Front. While many of them wanted to go to workshops on health, agriculture, education etc. a few took part in the workshops on apartheid, at some risk to themselves as there could well have been spies from the South African Government present. These women spoke at some length about the way in which the apartheid laws such as the pass laws, group areas act etc. serve to separate families for months of the year. The role of women as domestic servants in South Africa was also highlighted in a workshop run by the Domestic Workers Association of South Africa. (see Gaitskell et al. 1983: 105, for a brief history of this organization).

b. Women in the Liberation Movements

Women have long played a crucial role in the struggle against Apartheid (Bernstein 1978) and many have been forced to leave South Africa and Namibia as a result of their political activity. There were members of the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and the South West African People's Organization at both the Forum and the U.N. Conference. The work of these women ranges from that of political representatives and diplomats to organizers of child care in refugee camps. Together they presented a broad picture of the wide-ranging work which the liberation movements do in schooling, adult literacy, housing, child care, food production, health, media work, diplomacy, liason with African governments and western aid agencies, and even economic planning for the future of their countries after liberation. Every woman there from the liberation movements had some particularly horrific story about her treatment at the hands of the South African authorities and how they came to go into exile. There were also a number of women present who had experienced raids by the South African Army in the countries in which they are

currently living and who had had friends killed in these raids, including non South Africans.

c. Women in Western Anti-apartheid Movements

There were large numbers of women present from Anti-apartheid movements in North America and Europe. The majority of these were black women from the U.S.A., some of whom were key organizers in the current actions in Washington and New York such as the continuous demonstrations outside the South African Embassy and the campaign against Deak-Pereira for selling Krugerrands (which has since proved successful). These women were very well informed on the arguments against the Reagan policy of 'constructive engagement' and the dangers of codes of conduct for investors in South Africa such as the Sullivan Principles. They also spoke of the possible pitfalls of Black Americans envisaging the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa as being simply a struggle for civil rights. The disinvestment campaign is now very widespread among university campuses in the U.S. and, according to some, is approaching the intensity of the movement against the Vietnam war. There are several A.N.C. Representatives in the U.S. who work with the anti-apartheid movement. During the conference it was announced that the New Zealand Rugby team would not be going to South Africa which was greeted with great jubilation. Fortunately for Australia (?) most of the participants seemed not to have heard of the rebel cricket tour.

12. Women and Health

Women's Health is one of the areas in which major gains have been made during the decade, yet the more gains are made the more new areas of need become obvious.

a. Family Planning

Family planning is one such area, tremendous strides have been made in most countries in availability of family planning advice to women, in rural as well as urban areas, yet at this conference there was evidence of backsliding or attempts to turn back the clock, with some governments, the U.S. in particular wanting to use family planning programs as a way of imposing reactionary ideologies. As at the World Population conference last year this was resisted by most third world governments but was the source of great deal of acrimony. Similarly at the forum, there were N.G.O's (one of them from Australia) who carried out a vicious attack on International Planned Parenthood Federation. (Babette Francis was obliged to apologize to a hall full of African women for calling the 'naive' for listening to the advice of I.P.P.F.). "Pro-Life" women from the U.S.A. disrupted workshops on the U.N. Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

There were of course other issues to be debated in family planning, including the perennial question of injectible contraceptives. However at the Forum there seemed to be much more of a tendency of Africa women to talk about access to contraception in terms of having control over their own bodies, rather than simply as a way of keeping down the population. Sally Mugabe of Zimbabwe stressed this in a way which has, up till now, mainly been the emphasis of western women.

b. Breast Feeding

Breast feeding is another health "success story" in one way, with the passing of the W.H.O. Code on the Marketing of Breast-Milk substitutes. The Kenyan government chose the occasion of the U.N. Conference to incorporate it into legislation. Yet it too is an area which needs continuous work to be done in order to keep the gains that have been made and in order to make sure that rural women (and urban women too) understand why breast milk is best and why infant formula is dangerous. A related area which many of the Health action groups are

working on is to get a similar code for marketing practices in the pharmaceutical industry which will prevent the dumping of dangerous drugs in third world countries.

c. Child Survival Programs

Another area in which great steps have been made, particularly by UNICEF and the W.H.O. has been with infant health as part of a program of Primary Health Care. Primary Health Care is an educational program rather than a medical program and relies on imparting knowledge and skills to the mother. Work in this area has been going on in Kenya since the 1970's (Clark 1980). Simple devices such as growth monitoring, oral rehydration therapy, nutrition education, immunization campaigns, and improving water supplies and sanitation, have led to spectacular results in some countries. In Africa as a whole, unfortunately most of the quantitative gains have been cancelled by the famine conditions in several countries (UNICEF Annual Report 1985).

d. Traditional Practices Detrimental to Women's Health

Topics such as female circumcision and dietary taboos, traditional in some African countries, were the subject of several workshops organized by African women. At previous conferences, particularly at Copenhagen, these topics had been the subject of acrimonious debate between African and western women. This time it was clear that African women had been moving in the interim to set up their own organizations, often with opposition from their governments and male power structures, in order to address the question of the impact of these practices on women's health. One of the greatest problems they have had to overcome is support for these practices from women themselves, either from young girls who fear they will not be able to get married, or from midwives who make a living from performing operations. Another problem is the taboos on discussion of the topic. The women involved have therefore decided to treat the whole question as part of women's health in general, to train health workers to go into the field and to encourage open discussion as much as possible. Westerners are asked to keep in the background, apart from contributing money towards the upkeep of the health workers, and not to launch publicity campaigns against governments on the issue. (see for example the article entitled 'Foundation for Women's Health and Development.)

13. The Role of International Organizations

One of the outcomes of the decade seems to have the considerable impression it has had on the policy and practices of international organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental.

a. NonGovernmental Organizations

International Women's NonGovernmental Organizations such as the World Y.W.C.A., the Associated Country Women of the World, the Business and Professional Women, the International Alliance of Women, the World Federation of University Women, and the Womens International League for Peace and Freedom have really been the powerhouse of the Forum, ensuring its continuity from Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi. They have always been committed to working with women, yet the decade has brought more of an international focus to their work, given them more legitimacy with their governments and expanded their activities into developing countries, particularly Africa.

b. U.N. Specialized Agencies

U.N. Specialized Agencies have reacted in different ways to the decade. Most committed to women are UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the U.N. Fund for Population Activities, the I.L.O., UNESCO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). One of the fears expressed by several people

was that those U.N. specialized agencies which are most committed to women are also those which are coming most strongly under attack from the U.S. and some other countries e.g. UNESCO and the U.N.F.P.A.

14. Women and Militarism

African women are not as active on the issues of war and peace as are their sisters in Asia, Latin America or Europe. There is universal condemnation of South African raids on neighbouring countries and destabilization, yet there is little criticism of the high level of military spending by black African governments and this spending is often justified by South African militarization. However there was considerable interest shown by African women at the Forum in the issue of the arms race and disarmament in particular its relationship to women's welfare. Several speakers on the debt crisis in Africa pointed out that the I.M.F. rarely prescribes a cut in military spending in order to reduce the deficit. Increases in military spending also impact on women as they require an even greater shift to export crops in order to pay for the weapons, thus giving lower priority to food production. International peace organizations were very prominent during the forum and a Kenyan branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was founded as a result of a workshop run by W.I.L.P.F.

14. Women's Research Units

A good deal of the most interesting and insightful analysis of women's role in Africa seems to be coming from women who are working in small research groups, such as the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) which was founded by African women researchers who were dissatisfied with much of the research being done by foreign consultants and academics (Tadesse 1984).

15. International and Regional Networks

International and Regional Networks of all kinds were in evidence at Forum '85. Appropriate Technology networks, the Associated Country Women of the World, Adult Education Networks, networks of media women, researchers, religious networks etc. African women are active in many of them, indeed it seemed to me that they were, in many cases more aware of these networks than Australian women.

16. Achievements of the Decade

There was much questioning as to what have been the achievements of the decade. Only the South African and Namibian women were adamant that they had gained nothing from it, at least in terms of changes in their government's policies. Yet even they will reap eventual gains from it as people around the world become more aware of the part women play in the struggle against apartheid. Most other governments have made some steps, however tentative along the path of recognising women's contribution to the economy, keeping better statistics on women's work, making family planning advice more available even in countries where women still face legal and cultural handicaps to their greater participation in the benefits of development. There was general agreement that the benefits to women of the decade were not as great as they might have been on account of the economic crisis. Some saw this as inevitable, others saw the economic crisis as an excuse to take away gains from women.

17. Evaluations of the Forum

Forum '85 seemed to be a place where the three priorities of the Forum, Equality, Development and Peace seemed to come together more than at previous women's conferences. It also appeared that a higher level of understanding between western feminists and African women was reached and more similarities discerned than previously.

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