

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE IN NAIROBI

By Frene Ginwala



The writer of this article was one of the ANC delegates to the Nairobi Conference to mark the end of the United Nations Decade for Women.

In the workshops and meetings in Nairobi which marked the end of the United Nations Decade for Women last July, thousands of women pledged their solidarity and support for women struggling against apartheid. Between 13 000 and 14 000 women took part in the Non-Governmental Organisations' Forum '85, and, in nearly 1 000 workshops, explored all aspects of the themes of the Decade: Equality, Development and Peace, and the sub-themes of employment, health and education.

Over two weeks, the debates overflowed informally on to the lawns of the university campus, and continued through the night in the dining halls and hostels, as women from every part of the globe, representing all cultures and religions and a variety of political and economic systems, exchanged experiences. They spoke in many languages of their difficulties and successes as women engaged in improving their status and conditions, and in combating gender discrimination. There were occasions also for music and song, for building friendships, sharing the warmth of sisterhood and the joys of common purpose.

In Mexico in 1975 and at Copenhagen in 1980, third-world women in particular had stressed and won acceptance for the view that the status of women and the struggle to bring improvements were related directly to the general political, economic and social conditions in the societies in which they lived, and that problems of women's rights and their conditions could not be addressed without reference to the fundamental causes of oppression.

However, prior to the Nairobi meetings, the Reagan administration mounted a major campaign to try and set the clock back. It argued that politics should not be allowed to intrude and 'divert' the proceedings at Nairobi, and that the question of women's rights was essentially a social issue. In the view of the United States, apartheid, the rights of Palestinian women, US intervention in Nicaragua, racism, colonialism and imperialism were not matters that should be of concern to women or which affected women's rights and conditions, and therefore had to be excluded from the agenda! Implicit, perhaps, was the sexist approach that women were not capable of dealing with such questions and might get confused.

The very attempt to exclude led to a strong reaction, and the women of the world inflicted a massive defeat on the US administration, both at Forum '85 and at the Governmental World Conference. US women attending the Forum publicly dissociated themselves from the views of their government. Black Americans, including Angela Davis, joined with 'women of colour' from other countries, and discussed ways of combating racism, colonialism and apartheid. Participants in their thousands signed petitions to the Inter-Governmental Conference urging them to demand the release of Albertina Sisulu and all other political prisoners, and the imposition of comprehensive mandatory sanctions against the Pretoria regime. The peace tent pitched at the Forum was always filled to capacity, as women debated the threats to peace, imperialist aggression, the need for disarmament and the importance of women's participation in the peace movement.

There was unanimity in the condemnation of apartheid and repeated expressions of support

for the ANC and SWAPO. The ANC delegation made a significant contribution to the many workshops, expressing the solidarity of the South African people, and drawing attention to the interdependence of the many issues being debated. Most of the delegation of 30 women were young cadres whose energy, quality, political awareness and enthusiasm pervaded the Forum, leading many participants to remark with some awe, "The ANC is everywhere!"

The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women overlapped the last week of Forum '85 and continued for a week thereafter. Before leaving for Nairobi, Maureen Reagan, leader of the US delegation, had proclaimed her determination to ensure that political issues such as apartheid would not be on the international women's agenda.

On the eve of the World Conference, SWAPO President Sam Nujoma and ANC President Oliver Tambo came to Nairobi to:

"associate ourselves, our organisations and our peoples with the objectives of the Decade and with the urgent demand of one half of the world's population for full and effective equality, for development and peace."

In a joint statement, the Presidents said:

"Apartheid has been declared a crime against humanity, not least because it is a system which totally dehumanises women. In addition to the racial and sexual oppression and exploitation which Namibian and South African women share with their sisters in many other countries, there is in apartheid ideology and practice the additional element of regarding African women as nothing more than the breeders of future generations of exploitable labour."

"As the most structured and institutionalised oppression and exploitation of women existent today, apartheid is an affront to all women, undermining their status everywhere, and is a challenge that must be faced by all those concerned to achieve the objectives of the Decade."

The two Presidents ended their statement with a declaration of the policy of SWAPO and the ANC on the issues before the Conference:

"The women and men in the ranks of SWAPO and the ANC consider the question of the liberation of women and the achievement of the objectives of the Decade as a political issue. We are surprised that there are some who prefer to see the status of women in a vacuum, isolated from the condition of society around them.

"For SWAPO and the ANC, the liberation and equal status of the women of Namibia and South Africa is an intrinsic part of our national liberation struggle.

"On this historic occasion, when the UN decade comes to an end and we look ahead towards the year 2 000, we pledge: that SWAPO and the



Members of the ANC delegation to Forum '85: from left to right, Lindiwe Mabusa, Mavis Nhlapo, Jessica Monare and Ruth Mompoti.

ANC will not consider our objectives achieved, our task completed or our struggle at an end, until the women of South Africa and Namibia are fully liberated."

The preparatory meetings for the World Conference had failed to agree on a strategy document of over 300 paragraphs.* This disagreement was due largely to US intransigence over apartheid, to zionism, to differences over the characterisation of the global economic situation, the factors upon which peace depends, the relationship between peace and development, and the need to implement these strategies within the context of the broader goals and objectives of the new international economic order.

The "Tyranny" of the Majority Vote

Differences over procedure had also remained unresolved. At the United Nations General Assembly some years ago, a US Ambassador had referred disparagingly to the "tyranny" of the majority vote by "third rate countries." Aware that it would be unable to carry international opinion with it, the US suggested that decisions at the World Conference should not be taken by vote but by "consensus," which they interpreted to mean unanimity, thereby claiming a power of veto over all other organisations.

When the World Conference convened in Nairobi on July 15th, it decisively rejected this claim. After lengthy debates and intense negotiation, in the early hours of the morning, an agreed document on strategies for the future was arrived at. On the question of apartheid, the US found itself totally isolated, as eleven paragraphs, including a call for comprehensive mandatory sanctions, were adopted by an overwhelming majority, with only the US vote against.

Countries which had argued against allowing politics to 'interfere' with women's issues did not hesitate to jeopardise the entire conference and frustrate the work of years in order to protect their zionist allies. They threatened to withhold agreement on the entire strategy document and reduce the conference to naught, unless the references to

zionism were deleted. In order to prevent a breakdown of the conference, the PLO accepted with magnanimity a compromise draft.

The Long March to Equality, Development and Peace

At Nairobi, the strategies for overcoming obstacles to the achievement of the objectives of Equality, Development and Peace were focused on the period to the year 2 000. The UN Inventory of the Past Decade, the World Survey of Women's Conditions, based on information submitted by 100 governments, identified the main obstacle to women's advancement in key national sectors as:

"the deeply rooted traditional socio-cultural value system and attitudes which subordinate women and establish stereotyped sex division of roles in society."

Notions of these stereotyped roles underlay the debate about the "intrusion of political issues into women's issues" and had clearly determined the composition of many delegations. This was markedly so amongst the delegations of the countries who argued against the "intrusion of politics." The lone vote against adoption of the section on apartheid was cast by a Black American — male.

Comrade Gertrude Shope, head of the ANC delegation, had put another view:

"The women of South Africa believe that ultimately we will only be able to change our status and conditions when the people seize political power. We reject totally the notion put forward, outside and inside the conference, that politics are best left to men.

"... We will intensify our struggle, we will destroy apartheid and remove the scourge from our continent; so that South African women can join their sisters in the long march to Equality, Development and Peace."

Footnote:

*The document was entitled: *Forward-Looking Strategies of Implementation for the Advancement of Women, and Concrete Measures to Overcome Obstacles to the Achievement of the Goals and Objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women, for the Period 1986 to the Year 2 000: Equality, Development and Peace, A/Conf.116/12.*