

U.N. WATCH

Women's Work

The United Nations Decade for Women (1974-84) is over. In preparation for an evaluation meeting to be held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985, women's groups through the world are discussing agenda items, preparing for the confrontations that roiled two earlier meetings, and above all trying to assess the Decade and plan for the future. The goals set at the first meeting in Mexico City in 1974 were "equality, development, and peace."

In 1980, midway into the decade, women gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark, under U.N. sponsorship to see what progress had been made. Several speakers told the delegates of 136 nations that the status of women in most of the world had in fact deteriorated in the five years since the first conference. This was especially true in parts of the Third World where drought and poverty threatened survival.

There were actually two meetings in Copenhagen, both under U.N. auspices: an "official" conference with delegates appointed by member-nations, and another with representatives of nongovernmental organizations. At the NGO meeting, a panelist from the Swedish Parliament charged that the general conference, where each country was allotted fifteen minutes to speak, was using "male politicians' language—which means you spend a lot of time saying nothing." A member of the Danish Parliament remarked: "When you listened to statements over there about how perfect everything is in every country, you might think we don't need a conference on women."

A document distributed in Copenhagen noted that women were now entering the labor force in greater numbers but at the lowest level of employment; they were the first to be dismissed and usually without benefits. Women are the major food producers in underdeveloped countries but, lacking training and with only minimal education, prove inefficient farmers. The report went on to suggest that the food crisis in the Third World could be related to this lack of training. One recommendation was to link development programs more closely to women. A fifty-three-page questionnaire sent to countries participating in the conference turned up some startling figures: Illiteracy among women runs as high as 85 per cent in Arab states, 80 per cent in Africa, and 60 per cent in Asia.

Like too many U.N. forums, both the 1974 and 1980 sessions fell apart when Israel was made a stalking horse. In Mexico, a coalition of Arab countries led by the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Third World, and the Communist bloc, pushed through a resolution equating Zionism and racism. In Copenhagen a similar resolution was introduced by the West Asian unit of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which includes the PLO but not Israel. So many days were spent castigating Israel and the United States that Australia, Canada, Israel, and the U.S. voted against the Plan of Action and twenty more countries abstained from voting.

At a recent meeting sponsored by the American Association of University Women and other women's organizations in New York, Margaret Papandreou, wife of the prime minister of Greece, and Jihan el-Sadat, widow of the assassinated president of Egypt, talked about the obstacles

and complex issues facing the conferees in Nairobi. Mrs. Papandreou, an American by birth, told the audience of about a thousand women that progress for women moved at a "turtle's pace," the only real step having been the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro.

Mrs. Sadat, who teaches at Cairo University, was a bit more positive. Under her husband's leadership, women in Egypt had made substantial gains in the professions. Women are now allowing their gains to slip away, she maintained, and particularly in Iran. She called upon educated women to take a more active role in family planning and in fighting illiteracy.

In making preparations for the 1985 Nairobi meeting, a United Nations committee is trying to focus on women's issues and to avoid politics. Yet often only the thinnest of lines separates the two. This is obvious, for example, in the case of agrarian reform laws, which generally exclude women from land allocations, and in those situations in which, when food is scarce, men are traditionally fed before women and children.

It seems obvious that any real gains toward "equality" for women will be the result of education, social change, and political action in the U.N. member-states. In Nairobi, the experience of two earlier meetings and ten years of frustration might just persuade delegates to begin to sort out priorities among the wide-ranging agenda items. Such concentrated efforts could produce real achievements in the next decade.

Meanwhile, at U.N. Headquarters itself, the Ad Hoc Group on Equal Rights for Women, which represents women on the Secretariat staff, is protesting bureaucratic policies that keep them out of senior professional positions. In 1976 the General Assembly approved a resolution assigning a quarter of all professional posts to women, who comprise more than 50 per cent of the entire staff. Today women hold 22.65 per cent of the professional jobs on the Secretariat staff but only 7 per cent of the senior positions.

The Ad Hoc Group complains that women continue to be given few opportunities for promotion and are paid salaries that are lower than those of men in similar jobs. An earlier complaint, in 1981, drew on the findings of a questionnaire to which 140 women had replied that they were subjected to discrimination and sexual harassment related to job assignment and promotion. The charge is not new; the small number of women in the high grades was among the themes of Shirley Hazzard's 1973 book, *Defeat of an Ideal*, written after ten years of work at U.N. Headquarters on social programs for underdeveloped countries.

Responding to the Ad Hoc Group's protests, the Office of the Secretary-General and the (male) head of personnel asserted that member governments have failed to nominate a sufficient number of women to meet the 25 per cent goal set by the General Assembly. The personnel department agreed with the charge that women are generally on the bottom rung of the professional ladder at the U.N.

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