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PN-AAX-129
ISN 50209

August 1980

A FEMINIST VIEW OF COPENHAGEN

by Irene Tinker

The World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, which was held this past July in Copenhagen, allowed the international debates on trade, development and politics to dominate to such an extent that such feminist delegations as those of the United States, Canada and Australia were compelled to vote against the World Programme of Action. This program is meant to serve as a blueprint for improving women's economic and social position around the world. References legitimizing the PLO forced the US negative vote. This confrontation over the Palestine issue spilled over into the NGO Forum, sending out waves of anti-Semitism.

To be fair, there were positive aspects to both meetings. A series of strong resolutions were added to the World Programme of Action by the official conference. The Forum abounded with dynamic women of every creed and country, stimulating new ideas and building new networks. But at what cost---not only in money but in world opinion! I think women must look for new methods of influencing UN and world opinion, and seriously question what purpose a repetition of a women's conference such as this one or that in Mexico City would serve.

The major problem with holding another world conference rests on the fact that women take such matters very seriously---but men do not. Most women in Copenhagen—delegates and individuals--wanted to discuss issues relating to women: the growing shortage of fuelwood in many developing countries; the double issues of too many children and too much infertility; the problem of credit for women's groups and women's industries; the burden of the "double-day" in every country; the impact on women of the spread of multinationals to less developed countries; the support systems--and lack of them--for aging women; the limited amount of research on women in history or women in the future; the role for women in primary health care as new delivery systems evolve.

In fact, women wanted to discuss life and hope and tomorrow. The challenge, success and inefficiency of the NGO Forum was the plethora of women's groups; there were so many tunes and tempos that the too frequent result was simply noise. The problem that presents itself is simple: how do you take one tune and encourage variation at the same time eliciting orchestral support?

In Mexico, the International Women's Tribune focussed primarily on development issues. One reason was the situation of the conference in a developing country. Secondly, the women's movement was newer, less diverse, so that those going to Mexico were willing to focus on issues raised in the Plan of Action. Physically, the Tribune was cohesive. It offered three large auditoria, replete with translation equipment, and a loggia surrounding them,

where participants easily met, grouped, yelled, or rested. In Copenhagen, the setting was a sprawling university building with many small classrooms, no central meeting place, and only one room equipped with translation facilities able to hold 200 persons. The larger auditorium was a bus-ride away, which meant a commitment of the morning or afternoon to go and attend. At this auditorium there were major speakers and interpretation; the atmosphere was more lecture and less discussion, and there was minimal opportunity to catch and talk to the speakers before they disappeared back to the official conference or melted back into the Forum.

Every day for ten days there were three sessions of panels at the Forum. Some panels had been in the planning stage for months, others were conceived the day before, or the hour before, but all these groupings--perhaps as many as one hundred a day--tended to separate, and disperse the participants. Titles often flagged "developing" issues as opposed to "developed" issues; attendance at many was North American and European only. Given the frustration of delving deeply into issues, the predominance of simplistic ideological "solutions" comes as no surprise. The Forum was an exciting intensive course in real politik rather than the substantive interchange it was to have been.

The official UN conference was naturally even more dominated by world politics. The inclusion of agenda items on Palestinian women and Women under Apartheid guaranteed that. The commitment of the women delegates to discuss substantive issues resulted in many exemplary resolutions being added to the Programme of Action. Of special note are those reminding the national and international planning committees on the Water Decade to include women and women's issues, or the resolution for added organization support of rural women the world round.

For anyone who has attended other world conferences in this consciousness-raising series, neither the politicization of the official conference nor the diffuseness of the NGO activities comes as any surprise. These meetings are at best the imperfect breed, you say. And I agree. But with women's conferences, the negative aspects seem to me to outweigh the positive ones for two major reasons.

First, the male establishment does not take women seriously. Neither the U.S. State Department, nor the UN Secretariat, nor the Group 77, gives any standing in their priorities to women's issues. Hence, at the official conference there are no negotiating positions. No government or group really wants anything for women enough to compromise on other issues. Women's conferences, therefore, reflect the United Nations at its worst. Few countries send their first string players; those that can toss words around and understand the nuances of the game. The women delegates are caught between programmatic interests which they understand and diplomatic positioning derived from hundreds of previous conferences in which they played no part.

These UN women's conferences are in effect stacked against women. Once the debate moves to the New International Economic Order (NIEO) the issue is no longer "women's special needs" but rather nationalist demands and desires of women as citizens. That twist automatically changes the conference from

a unity trip to an international debating society. The conference may dress up the issues in women's terminology but the votes are controlled by the underlying NIEO debate.

Since women lack power in most nations and certainly in their diplomatic services, they seldom are given opportunity to take part in the other fora where the NIEO is debated. Women ought to be allowed to participate in a continuous way in the important and aggravating debate on the New International Economic Order, not confined to a five-year cycle of appearances. They must insist that the issues of women's special needs are inserted in every relevant debate: women and food production at the Food and Agriculture Organization meetings, women and multinationals at the International Labor Organization and UN Industrial Development Organization conferences, household energy needs of women at the next big conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy.

Secondly, the world press does not take women seriously. Because women care and because women's participation in UN meetings is rare, the press comes...and makes fun. Few in the press understand, much less follow, UN debates. When they see women seeking instructions from home, they laugh at the women--though men do it all the time. When they see Black American women siding with the African and Arab delegations to support the Palestinian Liberation Organization against the official U.S. position favoring Israel, they interpret the increasing isolation of the U.S. position in terms of trivial domestic politics. When they hear of the Cuba-India alliance, the press dismisses this power shift as sandlot politics just as the world press ignored the implications of the Mexico Declaration from 1975 when Zionism was for the first time added to the list of negative characteristics along with racism, imperialism and colonialism.

I am tired of seeing women set up by the UN and ridiculed by the world press. I am tired of newspaper accounts which trivialize women's conferences. But we women need to face reality too. Storming the UN conference may make good press, but it is ineffective. Holding women's conferences by men's rules on men's issues is a no-win situation. We can take women's specific issues to men's specific conferences. And we should. For women are part of all the crucial issues of the Third Development Decade. In some areas, women's interests are identical with men's: in peace or in international trade. In other areas women's responsibilities or occupations have given them differential issues. Whatever the topic, we should be there.

But women have benefited from international networking. We ought to be able to create new types of assemblies where women's special concerns can be discussed. Perhaps women's caucuses on food or on health might be formed at the UN meetings, then after a few years come together to assess the response of each nation and the United Nations to the demands and requirements of women. Or a tiered series of national, regional, and international meetings might be arranged where topics of development or social change are debated and added to, level by level.

We women claim to have qualities unique to our sex that make us more compassionate leaders. It is perhaps the contrast between those claims and the "cacaphony" exhibited when we try out the male games that makes us ridiculous in the eyes of the press. Let us improve our network, sharpen our tactics, develop new strategies, and demand that women's issues receive equity in the New Development Strategy.