

# Copenhagen— Mid-Decade World Conference on Women 1980

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I was one of a large delegation of Canadian women who attended the Mid-Decade World Conference on Women in Copenhagen in July, 1980. I was also fortunate in attending the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1975. As with most United Nations conferences that have to do with welfare and social services, the official UN government conference is paralleled by a non-governmental conference. In both Mexico City and Copenhagen I was present as a representative of an NGO (non-government organization) representing higher education for women. In Mexico City, the NGO Tribune was attended by 6,000 representatives. In Copenhagen that number rose to 8,000. At Mexico the Tribune was held in the huge Medico Centre with a main auditorium accommodating close to 3,000 participants; and other meeting rooms equally adequate; hence, there was a great sense of unity. In Copenhagen about 1,200 workshops and meetings were held in Amager Centre (an average of about 150 per day) during the nine days of activities. The meetings took place in different buildings—no one auditorium where translations were given could accommodate more than 600 at a time. As a result of somewhat inadequate facilities there was a greater degree of chaos in

Copenhagen than in Mexico City. That is not meant as a criticism of the Danish government. Had Denmark not generously offered to host the Conference, it might not have been held. It was originally planned for Teheran, Iran. The Conference at the end of the decade 1985 is slated for Nairobi, Kenya, with Tokyo, Japan, as a back-up.

One of the great dissatisfactions for women at these conferences is the total separation of the official conference from the NGO's. It has to be remembered that the official United Nations itself is a totally male-dominated organization. It was originated by men after they had grown weary of the "war games" played out from 1939-45. Only 8% of UN delegates and employees are women, including clerical staff. In 1975, the General Assembly had 180 women delegates as compared to 2,369 men. Of the 135 member states in the UN, 55 countries had no women in their delegations; 44 had the "token" woman delegate; that leaves an average of 2 women attached to the delegations of the remaining 56 countries. If 1975-85 has been set aside as the decade of consciousness raising for women, paradoxically this decision has been made for women by men.

The question asked by a number of women delegates was: What have our male masters in mind for us? Does equality to them mean an equal opportunity to serve in the armies and enjoy the glories of combat? Does development mean the building up of a reserve labour pool in case of a shortage of men? Does peace mean that women keep branches in their mouths like doves in order to be silent on the real issue threatening global existence?

In 1975 it became apparent that male governments, particularly of the nations known as the Group of 77, were using the women's conference as a means to press for their own economic and national aims and goals. Badly needed as a new economic world order is, that order was not part of the Women's Conference agenda. In 1975, however, a consensus was reached regarding the world plan of action known as WPA.

The World Plan of Action is a document which was prepared in March, 1975, by a United Nations committee composed of representatives from 23 countries and headed by that remarkable Finnish woman Helvi Sipilä. She is a judge, a lawyer, mother and grandmother. She has probably done more to push the needs of women at the UN than any other woman, but she does not make good headlines. The press cannot sensationalize her the way they do some of the more flamboyant conference members in order to denigrate conference activities.

The WPA calls for the commitment of national governments and international bodies to a decade of special measures to raise the status of women throughout the world. To this end it provides the guidelines for national action over the ten-year period from 1975-85 as part of a sustained, long-term effort to achieve the

objectives of International Women's Year (IWY); i.e., Equality, Development and Peace. The WPA proposes that women should have: a) equal status with men in law; b) equal educational and employment opportunities; c) equal rights within marriage and the family; d) equal access to political office and professional careers.

In Copenhagen the WPA was under revision at the official conference. When the conference ended, out of the 145 states participating, 94 nations voted in favour of the WPA and 4 against (Australia, Canada, Israel, United States), with 22 countries abstaining.

After the count the reasons for voting against the plan were summed up by Canada as follows:

The fundamental purpose of the Conference was to propose a program to overcome the basic inequalities between men and women. The Conference had been diverted from its fundamental purpose by a relatively small number of delegations. Political references, such as the term 'Zionism' led to tonight's ludicrous spectacle! We (Canada) had been quite prepared to deal seriously with the question of the Palestinian women. However, the discussions were limited to the political aspects of the Middle East situation. . . .

Among the countries abstaining were the United Kingdom, Western European countries, and a few South American countries. When the WPA came up for ratification in New York in 1980, Australia switched its vote to Yes. Twenty-two countries which had abstained all voted Yes. The U.S., Canada and Israel were the only remaining No votes.

Those of us who attended the 1975 conference were not surprised by the outcome. As one candid observer remarked:

The Conference was a puppet show of global dimensions where the female marionettes were controlled by the male governments, often many thousands of miles away. Its politicization was expected by most who are familiar with recent events at the UN, yet,—and this also must be said—the Conference must be regarded as a sad monument to the powerlessness of women in the international political environment. And, it is this environment where the most important decisions over peace and war are made.

Fran Hoskin, editor of *WIN* (Women's International Network), pointed out in her editorial on the Copenhagen Conference, that the UN evaluations themselves demonstrate the overall situation of women has not improved since IWY, 1975.

According to the telling statistics in areas affecting Employment, Health and Education (the sub-theme of the 1980 Conference) . . . the UN confirms that women are half of the inhabitants of our globe and are one-third of the "official" labour force: but in reality, they do two-thirds of the world's work—counting working hours—most of it unpaid. For this service women receive one-tenth of the world's income, and they own only one percent of the world's property. A more eloquent picture of exploitation can hardly be painted. What is more, this exploitation of women by men, even their own fathers, husbands and sons, is not limited to any society or any part of the world—this exploitation flourishes among the richest countries as well as the

poorest ones; it is supported by all religious denominations and by all economic, political and legal systems—as the UN documents thoroughly confirm.

These are the realities we all must face. However, the fact that these women's conferences have been held and have given world publicity to the status of women is an enormous step forward. It has to be conceded that the conferences themselves fail. *But* as Lucille Mair, the Secretary-General of the Conference, stated:

The important thing is what happens *after* the conference, how we implement the plans, and what we do at home to translate into action the blueprints and the paperwork.

The WPA gives Canadian women the wedge we need to force our governments to put more money into projects dealing with women's education, women's health and women's employment. If we do our homework, collect our data and information, they can hardly refuse to provide the necessary funds to bring about some real changes.

The politicization which destroyed the consensus at the official government conference also affected the NGO forum. The climate of the Copenhagen conference was quite different to that experienced in Mexico City. The tensions resulting from economic insecurities around the world were daily present and were inflamed by the tensions resulting from rising nationalisms. No matter what the lessons of history are, it seems that the same mistakes have to be made over and over again. For example, a rising tide of nationalism was apparent among African women. A West African women's group, AAWORD, who exclude all white women because they are white, touting

their political slogans (in the absence of any substantive contributions), disrupted meetings at the Forum. Their political literature condemns "international" activities. It seems hard to understand why they come to international meetings, except of course, for press coverage, which can be very profitable. Though this politicized group was only an insignificant minority compared to the many thousands (more than 8,000) who worked together harmoniously and set an example for constructive cooperation across all political and racial lines, unfortunately their leaders attracted much attention from the press by promoting the same goals that split the government conference, and by following the accusations of the male-dominated UN Group of "77" (the vocal leadership of the developing countries). They demanded unlimited financial support from the West for unspecified economic development, which they claim must come first—and before all women's needs. Discrimination against women, they claim, will somehow disappear with large sums provided for "development."

As *WIN* reported, the AAWORD group, led by Marie Angelique Savane, from Dakar, and joined by Nawal Sadawi who spoke for the PLO at the journalist's encounter, and some other women including Marie Assaad (Egypt), charged 'interference' and objected even to the UNICEF statement offering assistance to those countries who want to work for the abolishment of genital mutilation. One would have to agree with the Swedish journalist Gertrude Anljung who stated "What is the point in having international meetings if every country insists that only those who are personally involved can raise an issue. What then is sisterhood? Those who are most oppressed are least able to speak for themselves." (*WIN*, v. 6, no. 3, p. 20).

Sexism has to be seen as the worst evil and,

of course, embedded in sexism are those twin evils, racism and fascism. It does seem that too many women are deluded into thinking that the gains they are making in the male power structure are going to liberate women. They are too ready to sell out all other issues affecting women, for supposed equality with men. They do not understand that the ultimate form of discrimination is that which discriminates against a person simply because of sex. Sameness with men must never be interpreted as equality.

The Socialist or Communist bloc of countries had excellently prepared statements of the development and equality reached in their countries during the years since 1975. "Women have an active role in society." "They benefit from scientific and technological knowledge." "They have full rights to education—a guarantee of equality at work." "State protection for the family." "They have child care, child allowances, pre-school establishments." It sounds like "all this and heaven too."

After this litany of praise for the achievements and status of women it is somehow difficult to explain the report given by the Russian feminist Natalya Malachouskaya. She arrived at the Bella Centre having been expelled from Russia for her feminist activities. Denied press credentials entrance to Bella Centre, she gave a press conference outside. Her statement is reported in *WIN*:

The situation of women in our country is extremely hard. We are discriminated everywhere: in the family and at work, in the hospital, in the prisons and in our parents' home. 'Emancipation' has turned out for us women to be a much harder oppression than hitherto: at the cost of ex-

tremely great exertions physically and spiritually, the woman has to coordinate her work in the industry with the work in the home and the education of children. To give birth—is an awful martyrdom.

The daily life eats up the women's energies, the education of children in institutions is such that the children often are sick. Work is not creative, but just another slavery which we have to carry out in order to sustain ourselves and our children.

At the same time, we have all these obligations—we have to stand in the endless queues, suffer the lack of products, which are essential, and an atmosphere of hatred prevails in transport, in the shops, in all public offices and in the flats where we share the kitchen with others. All this causes women to despair.

When further taking in account the coarseness and the degrading treatment of women at work and in the home, the use of bad words, the drinking and the blows, you will understand that all these elements cause a social, political and moral injustice for the woman which governs her life and from which she cannot escape.

However, the authorities in the USSR try in all manners to silence the question of the position of women, and the existing women's organizations in our country cynically declare that there is no women question here.

The feminist journals 'Woman and Russia' and 'Maria' for the first time speak of the total pressure to which women are exposed in our society—and

they speak freely, so that the world realizes. The *GULAG* for the Soviet women is not limited to camps and prisons. The *GULAG* for her is the daily life! (*WIN*, v. 6, no. 3, p. 17)

One of the exciting things at this conference was the evidence of a more clearly defined feminist point of view. Elizabeth Reid, from Australia and Deputy Secretary-General of the conference, focused the feminist perspective. I was fortunate in hearing her at one of the *Forum* early morning briefings where she warned about the superficial aspects of equality and noted:

The root cause of inequality lies deep in the cultural consciousness and it is no use applying a Band-Aid mentality to the problem. . . . The strategies that we adopt must begin to undermine the culture that creates the subordinate position of women. Equality is too often interpreted in a way that accepts the given world as it is. And within this world women are to be like men. The problem is that very few men are able to fulfill themselves. Women should not aim for that sort of equality.

On the subject of development she had some equally cogent things to say:

True development for women is not becoming as women in the West are. These women have the highest suicide rates, the greatest incidence of medical drug-taking, and the highest economic dependency rate. A humanized multi-faceted concept of development is what we are talking about.

She was well reviewed in the *Forum 80* newspaper. Somewhat surprisingly, I might

add, since the paper was nothing like as effective as the *Tribune* newspaper in Mexico City. Despite the fact that more than 1,200 journalists (mostly women) were accredited to cover the conference, (English Canadian journalists were conspicuous by their near total absence, however) as well as numerous editors and publishers of women's journals, the *Forum 80* newspaper was published and edited by two men. More than half the articles appearing in the *Forum 80* were features written by men, and many had nothing to do with the women attending the conference. Many of the male-written features covered pre-selected topics. Insufficient information on the many conference events was the result.

All previous conference papers printed a daily calendar that was continuously up-dated—the most useful feature of such a paper; but the male editors evidently were unable or unwilling to cover the many activities. With the second week, the conference calendar became totally chaotic, as miscellaneous cancellations and additions were printed, often several days before the event, so that no one knew anymore where what took place or when.

The often sexist cartoons that the male editors (whose names were not given on the masthead) printed resulted in many protests. Only a few letters to the editors were printed. As Fran Hoskin states, the excuse “that no qualified woman capable of publishing and editing the *Forum* paper could be found” made by the NGO organizers is, of course, ludicrous. (*WIN*, v. 6, no. 3, p. 17)

That women's development the world over has been shockingly neglected was made evident to us in the many panels and workshops. The statistics are over-whelming. The human race currently numbers in its ranks some 800 million adults who neither can read or write.

According to UNESCO reports, 954 million illiterates will move into the twenty-first century. The proportion of women in this number is growing larger and larger. The Karachi Conference in 1960 moved to eradicate illiteracy by 1980. The ironic fact is that the number has grown and 60% of them are women. Too many women lack the basic skills for understanding the technical world around them. Those who cannot write always belong to the poorest classes and the tragic consequences of our failure to educate women is that more than 52 million children are in danger of starvation. Many governments of developing countries look upon the education of women and girls as “Educational Wastage.” The sub-themes of the conference, Health, Employment and Education are all part of much needed development programs in the Third World. Ironically most money going for education never touches the education of women and girls in rural parts.

In addition to a feminist perspective, this conference also differed from Mexico City with additional emphasis on Peace. The past five years have seen a frightening escalation of the arms race. In fact, during the conference, *Time* magazine had its feature story on Europe's arms race. There were numerous meetings on Peace and the Nordic women organized a fantastic peace march. French women denounced their government for being the biggest seller of arms to developing countries. A young Tahitian woman wept at one session I attended as she described the underwater explosions of French nuclear arms. These explosions are affecting the health of all the native Polynesians.

The world expenditure on the arms race is now over \$1 million per day. This massive diversion of world wealth into destructive weapons condemns women and children to illiteracy, disease, starvation and death. There

have been over 900 nuclear explosions on the face of the earth by the end of 1978. It is estimated that the number of soldiers in the world today is twice the number of teachers, doctors and nurses.

The interrelationship between feminism and ecology becomes very clear as Petra Kelly has written:

Woman must lead the efforts in education for peace awareness because only she, I feel, can go back to her womb, her institution, her roots, her natural rhythms, her inner search for harmony and peace, while, men, most of them anyway, are continually bound to their phallogocratic power struggle, to the exploitation of nature and to ego trips in way of military power and so-called security. For only a minute fraction of human history, has mankind attempted to control arms—and then only spasmodically. This timidity is *over*—for the earth has no emergency exit. . . .

We are often told, especially in the atomic age that the experts, that the big firms in charge of nuclearising and militarising do not know how to deal with the problems that now threaten worldwide disaster—'that all the facts are not in,' that more research must be done and more reports written. This has become the trap, the vicious circle, an excuse for endlessly putting off action. We already know enough to *begin* to deal with all our major problems: nuclear war, overpopulation, pollution, hunger, the desolation of the planet, the inequality among peoples. The present crisis is a crisis *not* of information, but of *policy*. . . .

As things stand now, the peoples,

especially women and children of the Third World, are to perish first. They have already begun to starve; all that is asked of them is to starve quietly . . . . There are now about 100 million children under the age of five always hungry. Fifteen million children die each year from infection and malnutrition. There are about 800 million illiterates in the world, nearly two-thirds of them are women.

The number of women unable to read and write is about half a billion. Forty to 70% of third world agricultural labour is female—they plant the seed, haul the water, tend the animals, strive to keep their families alive—but all the while they are socially inferior. Men in the third world are lured into the cities, into cash producing work for some of the many Western companies who have moved their production or they are joining the third world armies, supplied with Western guns and tanks . . . .

Petra Kelly's report becomes:

A plea to *all* women to join their sisters who have risen up—who have helped shape the ecological revolution—as a way and means to overthrow all the social structures of domination . . . . in the affluent parts of the world the same patterns of inequality and social inferiority of women prevail as in the third world. Equal pay and equal treatment in all areas of schooling, training, promotion and working conditions are not enforced. Women in South Italy, in the west of Ireland, women the world over, lead lives of desperation, of humiliation. Battered women and children take refuge from husbands and fathers in houses for battered women . . . .

(*WIN*, v. 6, no. 3, p. 44)

The reports we heard over and over again were somewhat discouraging, but on the whole the fact that women with all the diversity of a global gathering had come together a second time indicates great hope. Despite all of the frustration and confusion and the overwhelming global problems, we can create a new world order if women are willing to participate. We must not let an election go by at any level of government from local to international without backing some women candidates. We do not want to be part of the old male power games; we must clearly change the rules.

The last word should be given to two great women at the conference. Lucille Mair, the conference Secretary, reported to *WIN* that she realized that it was a privileged few who assembled at Copenhagen. Those present, however, were there to work for all women. She said:

In reporting some of the activities of the conference, I hope I have conveyed at least some of the sense of urgency and the willingness of women the world over to do whatever possible to help create a more human society.

Helvi Sipila, Director of the U.N. Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, provided a final view of the achievements of both Conferences:

Those who are absent have to be satisfied with the decisions made by those who were there; and this has always been the situation of women in the past. Men have been there; they served themselves, and they made the decisions which women had to accept. The political and economic structures are made by men and for their own benefit.

But now women have political rights,

they can vote and hold office, they can compete. Now we must look forward; we cannot look back and complain . . . . What do we need to do to change things? Change truly began in Mexico with International Women's Year. Women came to Mexico despite a lack of enthusiasm by many governments and the World Plan of Action was the result—a most important landmark.

This was the first time ever an international plan for women was defined with women as decision-makers. We have created something unique—a worldwide women's network. We all have the opportunity to participate.''  
(*WIN*, v. 6, no. 3, p. 6)