IWY CONFERENCES IN MEXICO CITY

An Interview with Muriel Duckworth

by Deborah Kaetz

Few women could care more or contribute more to a United Nations' conference on women than Muriel Duckworth. A reservedly dynamic women of sixty-seven, she has devoted her life to the cause of international peace and constructive growth.

Born in East Bolton (now Austin), Quebec, Duckworth attended rural Magog High School, Ontario Ladies College, McGill University and the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She has raised three children (with her husband Jack who died last year) and has five grandchildren. She now lives in Halifax.

Since coming to Nova Scotia in 1947 she has worked professionally as an advisor to the Adult Education Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and has involved herself in numerous voluntary organizations. She was a founding member of the Canadian Council on Children and Youth and President of the Movement for Citizens' Voice and Action in Halifax. As well she has served as national president of Voice of Women and was a moving spirit behind the highly successful Nova Scotia Festival of the Arts. Her commitment to the cause of peace was recognized in June 967 when she was made chairman of the International Conference of Women for Peace in Montreal and subsequently was nominated as a delegate to the International Conference of Women for Peace in Paris in 1968. Her activities having led to political involvement, she stood as an N.D.P. candidate for Halifax-Cornwallis riding in the 1974 provincial election.

Muriel Duckworth was a Voice of Women delegate to the IWY Conference held in Mexico City from June 23rd to July 9th. Here she talks with Deborah Kaetz about International Women's Year and the events in Mexico City.

DK: In what capacity did you represent Canada in Mexico City? Were you an official delegate?

MD: I was not an official delegate from the Canadian government. The government had a delegation to the official conference and I was attending the Tribune (the non-governmental organization conference), as a representative of the Voice of Women.

DK: Can you explain briefly the functions of the Voice of Women?
MD: The Voice of Women is a peace movement in Canada which has been in existence for about thirteen years. It was one of the movements that grew out of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war. It's had an involvement in the anti-nuclear war issue, the anti-atmospheric testing movement, the Vietnam War protest and makes representations to governments about the need for disarmament and the need for getting out of military alliances. It also has many local involvements. For instance, here (Halifax) we're involved at the moment in looking at school education and seeing what's happening to children in schools. All across the country, each local group has different involvements.

There's also a strong involvement in the refugee movement. Voice of Women members across Canada have been very supportive of Chilean refugees, for instance, and tend to be a rather strong, small group of women across the country that people can turn to in matters like that.

One of our members in Toronto is a Spanish-speaking woman who's been very active in the attempt to get amnesty for Spanish prisoners. And a couple of years ago, she was instrumental in bringing to Canada two young Spanish women whose husbands were in jail in Spain. She just picked up the phone, talked to Voice of Women across Canada and set up their cross-Canada tour that way. And during the Vietnam War, twice we had delegations of women from the NLF (National Liberation Front) and

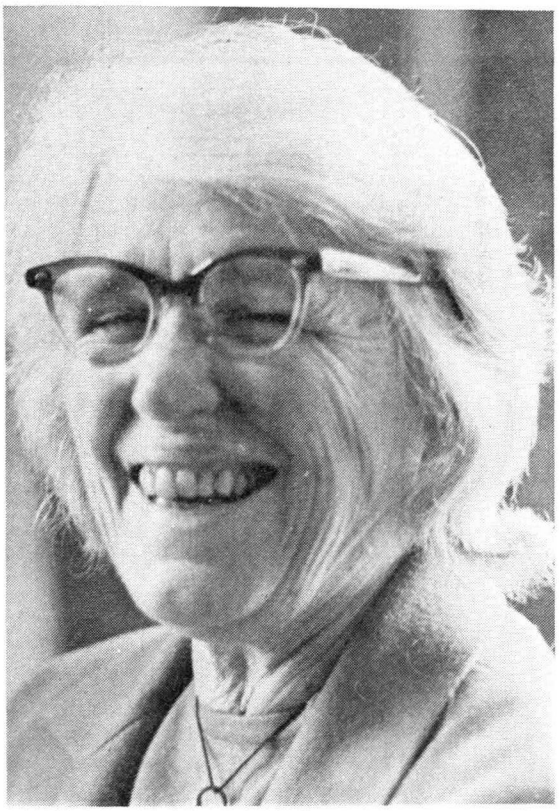

Photo of Muriel Duckworth courtesy of Deborah Kaetz.

North Vietnam, and the second time it also included women from Laos, who we travelled with across Canada so that they could meet Canadian women, Canadian people and also American people. Voice of Women is very much involved in the international scene.

And it also has been involved in the women's scene although it is not strictly oriented toward women's issues. There are even a few men members and our meetings are always open to men if they want to come. But it got started on the basis that women were not playing their part. The world was in grave danger and the women were not doing anything about it. It started in the early 1960s just before the Women's Strike for Peace in the United States; it was all really part of the same reaction to the conference in Paris after the Power U2 incident when Khrushchev went home angry from the Paris peace talks and everyone thought there was going to be a nuclear war right then. It was a most spontaneous thing.

One of our policies has always been to make contact with women who were the so-called enemy. We saw that other women's organizations were centered in the western world or in the socialist world and we wanted to cross these boundaries. So we did an International Conference on Women in Montreal early in our history.

DK: What year was that?
MD: That year was 1962, two years after we were founded. From that came a proposal to the United Nations for International Cooperation Year. They changed the word. It was to be called International Peace Year and they changed it to International Cooperation Year. And then in 1967 our Centennial project was another International Women's Conference which we held again in Montreal. And that was during very, very tense times. While the conference was taking place, the Biafran War became hot. And the Seven Days War in Israel erupted. So we met under very difficult circumstances. And yet I think it was a good thing to have done. I don't really believe that any one meeting is critical but I do feel that a whole lot of things together represent something good--that the whole situation would be worse if you didn't do what you could do.

DK: So many of the things you've done with the Voice of Women have the same kinds of objectives that the organizers in Mexico City hoped to discuss?
MD: Yes, they were very close to our objectives. When the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was set up in Canada, we did present a lot of briefs and we used the Human Rights Statement of the United Nations as a basis for many briefs. Our objectives have always incorporated broad social and economic goals that include women but go beyond women. So it is true that our objectives were very much in line and I think that's why we got one of the grants.

Also, I was on the International Women's Year Committee that was appointed by the Nova Scotia government . . . . They found out I was the only woman from Nova Scotia going, so Kathy Logan, the provincial coordinator for IWY, very kindly went to the minister who was responsible and they agreed to pay my living expenses. So, on faith, I got there and it didn't cost the Voice of Women anything.

DK: You were one of the unofficial representatives?
MD: Yes, that's right. In a sense official because we were listed as being representatives of national women's organizations. There were about fifteen Canadian women who went as representatives of national women's organizations. And probably most of them had some government assistance. Altogether there were about sixty Canadian women there.

DK: What about the official delegation?
MD: The official delegation was ten, I think, headed by Coline Campbell, Liberal member of Parliament from Nova Scotia. The reason she was selected is that she was Parliamentary assistant to Marc Lalonde who's responsible for International Women's Year in Canada. Very close to her were Freda Paltiel, whose job relates to questions concerning the status of women and of relating all this to the Department of State; and Silva Gelber, who is the head of the Women's Department, Department of Labour. From the non-governmental side, her advisors included the vice-chairman of the National Advisory Committee on the Status of Women (Yvette Rousseau), the president of the Conseil du Statu de la Femme (Lorette Robillard, Quebec City), two other women who were provincial government employees especially for International Women's Year, one from Ontario (Ethel McLellan) and one from British Columbia (Gene Errington). And there were also two men in the delegation (Richard Burkart, U.N. Economic and Social Affairs, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa; and D.R. Whelan, third secretary and vice-consul of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico). Hylda Bateman, liaison officer for CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), Division of External Affairs, was also a member of the delegation.

DK: How was the conference organized?
MD: It was not a highly prestigious conference, being the first conference which was largely made up of women. The amount of money put into it by the United Nations wasn't great. It had about one third the amount of money put into the World Population Conference and the World Food Conference, for instance. And those conferences had a very small delegation of women which was very strange. You would have thought that a lot of women would have been involved in food and population conferences but they were not.

The general meetings of the IWY conference were run on the model of the general assembly. There wasn't much

chance for anybody to participate; it was just a series of speeches. There were, I think, two hundred states represented and each one made a speech; it took the two weeks practically to get those speeches on the record. And they did have working committees. The Canadian delegation was, of course, divided among the working committees; but they were very restricted in what they could say.

DK: Could you explain the difference between the two caucuses?
MD: The official conference was called the United Nation's Conference for International Women's Year. That was held in a large center on one side of Mexico City. Our conference, called the Tribune (tribune being a place where people talk to each other) was held on the opposite side of Mexico City and it was a non-governmental organization conference. It's related to what happened at the environment conference in Stockholm, Sweden, when a lot of people said there are things that have to be said that are not going to be said by official government delegations. And they had a very exciting counter-conference going on in Sweden which was quite spontaneous, completely organized by people who just cared about the question.

DK: Was there any give and take between the two conferences?
MD: No, that was the unfortunate thing. There was so little give and take between the two conferences that it was frustrating. For instance, even before we went, we weren't well-prepared. We didn't have the World Plan of Action before we went and I received a copy of it just after I arrived. In fact most of the women in the Tribune didn't see it because there weren't enough copies to go around and that was the whole basis for discussion at the other conference. The Tribune had an entirely separate program. The connection between the two was that every morning for an hour, from nine to ten, somebody came over from the other conference and briefed the Tribune on what was happening. There was no rebuttal--no chance of going over and briefing them in return.

This was an irritant to some people . . . . Betty Friedan was there and she had quite a large part to play in assembling a group of women who did take the World Plan of Action and go through it. They suggested amendments to it and then got an appointment to talk with Mrs. Hilvi Sipila (Finland) who was the senior U.N. official at the other conference. She is the only woman with the status of an assistant to the Secretary General of the United Nations. She said there was absolutely no way to include outside amendments. There was nothing she could do about it. As a matter of fact, they had over eight hundred amendments of their own to deal with. And in the end they didn't even deal with those. They just couldn't. They adopted, as a working paper, the World Plan of Action which had been

prepared in advance.

The conference did, I think, another very ridiculous thing. They had the wives of heads of states go. This was the only impression that many people got Time Magazine made a big thing of it--the wife of Sadat, the wife of Rabin--these women who were not the heads of state, who went there to speak for their husbands. It was done exactly the way other United Nations conferences were done. They made the main speeches and then, on the whole, they withdrew and left it to other people to carry on.

The Mexicans weren't keen to have their own left-wing women there and that made it hard for any women on the left to get into the conference. As a matter of fact, according to their own terms of reference, anyone could go and listen in on the general sessions of the conference. But they made it very, very difficult for people to get in. We were advised to remove our labels; we were more likely to get in if they didn't see that we were at the Tribune. The night that Coline Campbell spoke the whole visitors' gallery was empty because it was so hard to get in.

DK: Who was in charge?
MD: That was another peculiar thing. The head of the Mexican delegation was the Attorney General, a man. Because he was the head of the delegation for the host country, he became the head of the conference. And there's nothing anybody can do about that; that's how they're set up.

DK: What were your expectations? What did you expect to gain for yourself, for women?
MD: We didn't have an awful lot of expectations because we had so little information in advance.

DK: Had you gotten together before?
MD: No, we had not and that's one of the criticisms that I've made in my report. It was only a few days before we left that we got a very incomplete list of who else was going. I happened to know a woman in Toronto who phoned me and we decided to room together.

I had few expectations, personally, but I thought it was a good thing to do, even though it was expensive. I didn't go along with people who said it was a waste of money even to attempt to do a thing like that. I think the Tribune achieved quite a lot on a small budget. Some people were very critical of it, because they saw it as just another group of middle class women getting together. But it at least symbolized important things for many people. I met a Japanese woman to whom it was so important to go that she saved and saved and SAVED and even borrowed. It cost her the equivalent of a year's income. I met a woman, a teacher in Toronto, who went at her own expense because she's an ardent feminist and thought it was important to be there. There were Canadian Indian women there. There was only one Canadian black woman; a leader in the work with Visible Minorities. An excellent woman--a very down-to-earth type--from the Caisse Populaire

movement was there and also women from farm organizations and women's institutes.

At the Tribune there was a marvelous exhibit of Mexican crafts and some Mexican craftswomen were there. Unfortunately, the people speaking for craftswomen around the world were not the craftswomen themselves. I don't know how you get around that. That's what happens at most international conferences. Poor people just don't have any mobility; they never get to go.

DK: Was there any provision made for their voices to be heard?
MD: Yes. The Tribune events were very spontaneous. There was, for instance, a Japanese woman who took part in a panel on the platform about the great things they're doing for women in Japan. Then after she spoke, a young Japanese woman got in line for the mike. (There were lines and lines of people who wanted to speak.) Everything was simultaneous translation in English, French and Spanish. This young woman couldn't speak any of those languages . . . but she insisted on speaking and really contradicted everything the woman had said from the platform. Because she was speaking in Japanese and it was being translated, it took quite a long time, but she did say her piece. When there was a sizeable representation from any country that sort of thing happened.

DK: Let's talk about the issues.
MD: I have to say that many women there were not concerned with women's issues. You've got to have a certain level of living before you can get into the questions of the rights of women.

An underlying issue was the need for a new economic order. This conference was held before the special U.N. assembly on the new economic order which is to deal with a better, fairer distribution of the world's goods and the world's opportunities. Most people at the conference recognized the special problems women have in developing countries. For instance, if a rural part of a country is taught how to raise more chickens on a certain plot of land and given a better breed of chickens, few pay attention to the fact that it means the women will have to carry more water because they haven't got the wells and are therefore forced to do more work without the facilities that they need. That kind of awareness certainly came out at the conference. And many voiced the problems of the women who are staying at home doing the traditional women's crafts while the men are being taken away to do more industrial kinds of work in the larger centres.

Health questions were also a very high priority I would say. For everybody. The questions of poverty and inequality, and of discrimination against women in employment, were recognized too. One illustration of discrimination came from Iran where they make those beautiful little shoes. Traditionally the men do the sewing and the women do the

fancy embroidery. But traditionally the men get paid more for sewing, which isn't as hard, than the women get paid for the embroidery.

Another issue which was naturally important in a gathering like that was the lack of women in decision-making positions. That's very noticeable. I would like to think that if the conference had been freely set up by women for women, it would have been done differently, but it was done in the traditional U.N. mold which is a male way of doing things. The women who work at the United Nations have recently put out a report about the discrimination against them within the U.N. That made many people at the conference say "How could you expect anything to come from a conference, put on by a body that treats women like that?" (But that does reflect the way all society is. Our own Canadian delegation to the United Nations has never had more than three women. There are very seldom women heads of delegations to the United Nations.)

DK: How did women at the conference feel about the question of men? Did they feel that they were going to be able to work with the established structure or did they feel that they had to make new rules and new structures themselves?

MD: There'd have been very divided feelings about that, I think. It didn't come up officially, but I met one woman who was circulating a petition saying that we had to have an international organization of women which was our own, run by ourselves because women are not going to be able to do it through the existing structures. But I don't think that was the general feeling. I think now the general feeling is that that kind of thing won't work, that the world is made up of men and women and that somehow men and women together have got to solve the problems.

I want to give you the illustration of Canada's failure to give women an equal vote. Coline Campbell made the big announcement at Mexico that from now on Canada would give high priority to needs of women in its development program abroad. That sounded great. But I've been checking up ever since. Nothing has been done about it in Ottawa, absolutely nothing. Nor have they put any women in decision-making positions in Ottawa or CIDA and, until they do it in Ottawa, they're not very likely to do it in one of their receiving countries.

Another incident that took place there goes back to before the conference. I don't know if you've heard the name of Mary Twoaxe Early; she is one of the women who's being evicted from her home in Caughnawaga because she married a white man. Some women felt that Mary Twoaxe Early should go to Mexico, that to make the case outside Canada was an important thing to do. The Voice of Women in Toronto got money from the Women for Political Action . . . to pay her way to Mexico City . . . . She did

get the money and it was the only thing that we did together as a delegation. I worked very hard on that.

One night she wasn't sleeping very well; she phoned home to see how things were and found that her son-in-law, who is a policeman, had just had to handle her eviction notice . . . . We did plan a good strategy, I think, and the way it worked was that other people had to see that she got to a mike because she wasn't very aggressive. The first person who spoke was a young Indian woman from B.C. who's a lawyer and all she did was read the Indian Act.

And then Mary spoke, told how it was for her, and how long she'd lived there, what it meant to lose her home and so forth. The third person who spoke was the vice-chairman of the Fédération des Femmes de Quebec and they had taken a position in support of Caughnawaga. She read a telegram--in French--that this was a terrible thing to happen while Canada is sitting on the United Nations Commission for Human Rights and also while the Indian Act is under review by Indians. The telegram went to Trudeau and to Bourassa and to the chief of the Caughnawaga Reserve. And it got good coverage in the Montreal press and once she got back she got lots of coverage. They offered her special dispensation but she refused . . . . It's still going on but I think it was a valuable contribution. When you're away from home in a foreign country you can't defend an action like that.

Another thing I want to talk about is disarmament which was an important issue at the Conference. The Canadian government decided they wouldn't mention the word peace. And the three purposes of International Women's Year were equality, development and peace. Coline Campbell didn't mention it because it could be used for political purposes. (Development--of course, Canada's happy to talk about development but that raises another question. A lot of Canadian and American women had no idea what development meant. They thought of it in terms of personal development and had no idea that the United Nations meant by that development of women's role in developing countries, which may be desirable or undesirable depending on what you mean by development of the country.)

On the whole, I didn't feel that the people from North America had the same sense of urgency about disarmament as the people did from the developing countries to whom armament means wars . . . . They are just destroyed by wars. Their progress gets set back by armament.

One of the two men who spoke was Dean MacBride, a Nobel prize winner, who did a lot of work with Amnesty International. He was circulating a petition calling for a U.N. conference on disarmament, that had the backing of the Women's

International League for Peace and Freedom, of women from the socialist world and others. They did get a lot of signatures for the petition which called not only for the U.N. to set a date for the conference, but also called for non-governmental organizational representation at it. I think that such representation is the most hopeful thing that's happening in the field of U.N. Conferences right now. If there's going to be any women's input into a disarmament conference that's the way it will be, because again there aren't enough women involved in U.N. planning.

. . . There's still one other thing I should mention and that is the question of women prisoners. Rape was discussed and recognized both as an act of war and a general act of violence against women prisoners. But, of course, from the beginning of time it's been an act of war and is only beginning to be talked about, really, as a thing that happens to women during wartime. But there were several women there from Chile and that marks one of the big differences between the Tribune and the other conference. The Chilean women at the Tribune were women who had been in jail. And, of course, at the other conference they were an official delegation from the present government. And it was just about that time that the U.N. was going to send a team into Chile to investigate charges of torture and of unreasonable imprisonment . . . . That was an important point for me because women in prisons are at the lowest level of society wherever they are. It's usually worse for them--wherever it's bad, it's worse for the women than it is for the men.

DK: Was there any opportunity for protest and free expression?
MD: They did set up a session that was good for protest--every day between one and three. It was called "speak-out."

In one, an old Mexican peasant woman was there and she was talking about her method of birth control which she knows is good. She wouldn't tell us what it was because she's been trying to get it on the market. She was really delightful. And after she spoke, another young woman took the mike and said that this was to be taken seriously. And she asked the press who were there not to make a joke of it. . . . Of course the question of family planning and birth control did come up. This is a big issue . . . this question of 'is family planning an imperialist plot?' Except for the "speak-out" our time was tightly structured. From nine to ten we had the U.N. briefing from the other conference and from ten to one and from three to six a solid discussion by panels and by people on the floor. They were very well chaired; they were all chaired by women and the women were very, very competent.
DK: How was the camaraderie . . . was there much good feeling among the women present?
MD: Yes, there really was. The Americans take the brunt at international

conferences these days. And the Jews, the Israelis. Myself, I wasn't present when there was anything anti-Israeli, although they did pass a resolution which added zionism to imperialism, racism and sexism as evils to be got rid of.

Apart from that, there was certainly a lot of openness to the women from the socialist world. The Cuban women were always well received. . . . Of course there's a great division among the women from the communist world now. I doubt whether the Soviet women went to hear the Chinese women who spoke. And when the Israeli women spoke, Madame Sadat walked out; when Madame Sadat spoke, Madame Rabin walked out. That was just carrying over male behavior, so inappropriate.

But . . . you cannot have an international conference like that where all the things that were bugging people don't come out. People complained about that --that we didn't restrict it just to problems about women. But that is absolutely impossible in the international scene the way it is today. There are just too many issues.

DK: How do you feel about the way IWY was handled generally?
MD: I wasn't happy with the federal government program. For instance, we started trying to get information long before we could get any. The usual thing happened--the federal government held it tight to the chest until they had their program ready and then they called conferences to tell people what the program was going to be. And there was a lot of very legitimate protest about that. But that's not good enough. It's just ridiculous not to provide a means for women to get together to do the planning for themselves.

I think the women's program of the Citizenship Branch was the best inside the government. I didn't like the "Why Not?" slogan at all and I felt the Canadian government should have stuck to the program of equality, development and peace and really pushed it. They completely ignored it as far as I can see. The WHOLE thing was equality. The whole emphasis was on why not, why not women doing this and women doing that and changing their attitudes--attitudinal change was their slogan. And I don't really think that's the chief function of the federal government.

DK: In terms of development or peace, how can women here make their presence felt?
MD: A group of women in Ottawa had conversations with women from Africa at Mexico City. They talked about direct people-to-people contact between these two groups so that if Canadian women know there's a village somewhere that needs sewing machines, then there could be a very direct relation, outside of government entirely. Women in Canada could learn a lot from having such direct contact.

DK: Do you think that as the Women's Movement now stands in Canada that women are still pretty much concerned with their own development, and not yet at a point where they are able to start branching out?
MD: I think the Movement is improving. I really do. I know women are concerned with their own development and, heavens, they have to be. There are so few women who are willing to put peace and development as a high priority . . . so that you really have to have a separate movement of people, I think, who are in that. The Voice of Women is in that. Oxfam as well has a pretty good attitude; it does not just relieve hunger, but also tries to do something that is politically and economically intelligent at the same time.

I've asked women across the country if they're ready to consider the needs of women in prisons in Canada. And they really aren't. Very few women are. There are some wonderful women here in Halifax who are working with women in prisons, but they're still invisible, I think, to most of the women's movement.

I think that you have to be selective about the things that you do get involved in . . . to see whether they are really honestly oriented toward the best interests of the people that you think you're trying to help.

On the peace thing, it is a question of education, how you bring up children and how you really inform people--and of coping with the hugeness of the question, without being unrealistic about the influence of, for instance, the multinational corporations. . . . I think one thing we have to do is use the media better than we have used them. It is important not only for the image they give of women on the media but for the definite middle-class male viewpoint that's so predominant.

By the way, there's something I'd like to relate this to . . . and that is the recommendation for a separate government department for women in Nova Scotia. I think it should be supported . . . because my feeling is that if they just appoint a low-level woman civil servant (in the Department of Labour, for instance), to look after the interests of women, that's going to make a very, very difficult role for her, because other departments will pay very slight attention. I do think that a Ministry of Women is the very best solution and not a big, complicated expensive bit of machinery . . . . It's got to be done at a very top level and I think that everybody has to let the government know that that's the desirable thing to do.

DK: Did the Mexico conference provide any lessons for Canada?
MD: Well, the whole International Women's Year thing shows us that its now back in the laps of the women.