

# FORUM '85:

## THE "UNOFFICIAL" CONFERENCE

*Janet Laidlaw*

*Le Forum 1985 a réuni plus de 13 000 participantes inscrites, venant de la communauté de femmes non gouvernementale qui ont assisté à Nairobi. Au cours d'ateliers bien orga-*

*nisés et de réunions non structurées une ambiance chaleureuse et pleine d'énergie créatrice.*

*Janet Laidlaw examine ici les perceptions les plus significatives formées lors de ces ateliers et réunions de même que les stratégies pour la réforme qui étaient présentées. Elle*

*présente le tout dans les contextes politiques dans lesquels ces discussions et ces débats ont eu lieu. Son discours se termine avec une évaluation de la signification continue des problèmes soulevés par le Forum 1985 et pour le gouvernement et pour les ONG.*

The UN Decade for Women was launched in 1975 in an attempt to redress the discrimination faced by women around the world. The decade was created by a worldwide awakening of women who began to challenge the status quo because their needs were not met within the existing patriarchal systems.

The Nairobi Conference in July 1985 marked the third world conference to be held during the decade. Previous conferences in Mexico City and Copenhagen were designed to raise public consciousness, to focus awareness on women's issues and development, and to plan strategies and monitor progress to improve the status of women.

The official conference of governmental delegates in Nairobi was convened to debate and ratify the Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000. In addition to the official UN Conference, an informal conference, Forum '85, was attended by women representatives of NGO's and women attending as individuals. Forum '85 brought together 13,000 women from around the globe to assess the progress women had made in the decade and strategies for the future. Through a loosely structured workshop format, women had the opportunity to inform, debate, analyze, learn from one another. The dominant mood of the Forum was one of warmth and creative energy, women learning and working together. This was a massive world conference organized by women for women to foster growth and learning – and ultimately to change the world.

With 1000 workshops given over 100 per day on every conceivable topic related to women's lives, the major frustration was the necessity of choosing only one activity

at any given time from a myriad of exciting possibilities. It was a fertile ground for learning and every woman's agenda was crammed to make the most of every opportunity. Each morning we checked the daily Forum newspaper and workshop schedule to plan the daily itinerary. The workshops examined the problems women face in the world, and the Forum ensured that each topic was discussed from viewpoints representative of the four corners of the globe. Workshop participants themselves became resource persons as they spoke about the issue under discussion from the context of their reality in their own country.

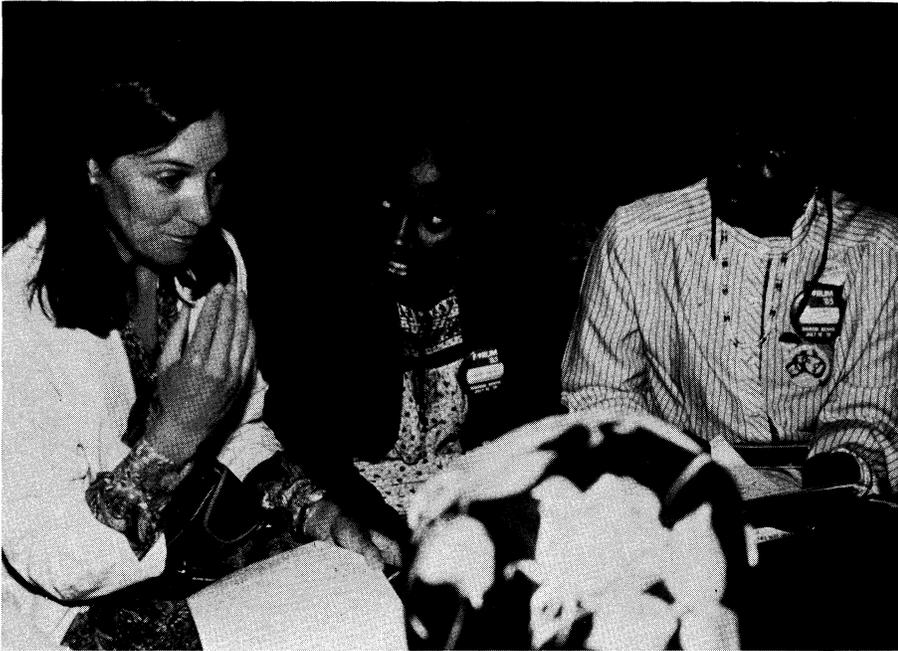
For the most part, workshops were very well organized. Those that were expected to be most popular were held in large lecture theatres with simultaneous translation in 5 languages – English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Swahili. Other workshops were held in classrooms and, if these proved popular, were jammed to the hilt, with overflow crowds peering in from the hallway or moving on to the second workshop on their list. Many workshops were organized by panels of women from several countries – networks formed during the decade to explore themes of development. Several of the most impressive workshops were staged by these networks:

- DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era) – a group of Third World Women based in New Delhi who have written a book analyzing development as it relates to women.
- World Council of Indigenous Peoples – indigenous women from five regions of the world organized in 1975 to fight for human rights and land rights.

- Society for International Development – made up of NGO women from all over the world.
- ISIS – focussing on a women's worldwide communication network, audio-visual tools, a journal and a women's exchange program.

The key perception to emerge from the workshops – both the formal presentations and the comments of individuals from the floor – was that development for women in the past ten years has been a "one-step-forward, two-steps-back" proposition:

- Although most countries now have legislation permitting women to own land and property, age old customs and inheritance laws ensure that virtually all property still passes from father to son.
- Although girls are gaining more access to primary and secondary education worldwide, many are still kept from school. A mother's domestic work can be lightened by 40 per cent giving her more time in the fields – if her daughter is kept home to help her. There are fewer jobs available for educated women than men, and a married woman's earnings accrue to her husband's family. So educating a daughter can present drawbacks and an uncertain long-term benefit for families.
- Women are coming into the labour market at an increasing rate. However, they are still considered responsible for all domestic work, so in fact work a double day. Most women still have limited employment options, primarily in traditional "women's" jobs based on their role as nurturers and homemakers: social service jobs, nursing,



Forum '85 Workshop Participants

Credit: Sylvia Spring

education. In these jobs they are on the whole less well paid and have less opportunity for advancement than their male counterparts.

- Polygamy has been made illegal in some countries. However, men who wish to take another wife now simply divorce the first one, leaving her destitute, with no job skills or economic means of self-support for herself or her children. In countries that do not yet have the educational and social service infrastructure that would allow women to be economically independent of their husbands, women can be worse off in a monogamous marriage system.

For every advancement made by women, new problems were revealed, requiring new solutions. The Forum opened a window onto these problems. There was a need, first of all, just to talk about the problems, air the grievances, bring them out into the open, and share them with the world. Women from developed countries talked of loss of personal identity in family responsibilities, lack of opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment. Women spoke of the tendency in political movements to postpone advancements for women in society and focus on "more important" questions at hand, such as racism, political struggle, recession.

Indigenous women spoke of a need for land rights and compensation for lost

land. Latin American women told of genocide against natives in Guatemala and Peru, racial discrimination in employment, lack of representation in government, lack of education. Canadian women talked about lack of respect for native culture, poor social conditions, and lack of self-respect leading to drug and alcohol abuse among native people.

An Egyptian woman talked about the effects of religion fundamentalism on women. Fundamentalism is not confined to the Arab world but includes a renewed Christian and Jewish fundamentalism as well. Because all are patriarchal religions, the detrimental effects are mostly felt by women. These effects are greatest in Islamic countries where there is no separation of church and state. Increased use of the veil and wearing of the *chador* are obvious curtailments; others include lack of access to birth control, limitations on women's potential through traditional male-female roles, and woman's lack of status within the church (inability to become priests, participate in rituals or attend mosques). The women carry the burden of fundamentalism, while men have the power, wealth and rewards.

Women act as shock absorbers for society. With the recession, as social programs are cut, women are expected to look after the sick and elderly at home, take a low paying part-time job to supplement the family's dwindling income, stay home with children when there is no

daycare, organize food banks, crisis centres, self-help groups.

Women farmers find their land base eroded by foreign investment in cash crops and machinery to grow export commodities. Farm aid is directed to men for the export market, rather than to women who are the subsistence farmers of Africa. The results for women are loss of traditional access to land, poorer crops, loss of income, hungry families and longer working days.

Women workers are often ghettoized in poorer paying "women's work." They suffer higher rates of unemployment, and because of family responsibilities can work fewer hours than their male counterparts and often have their careers interrupted. And women are the favoured employees in free trade zones because they are docile, unsure of their rights, and will work for lowest pay under poor working conditions without complaint since any job is hard to find.

*The scales of world equality are out of balance. The side marked 'woman' is weighed down with responsibility, while the side marked 'man' rides high with power.*

*Tilting first under rules that say women must do all domestic work, the scales are tipped further by men's greater opportunities to earn wages. Advantage builds on advantage until today they are tilted so steeply that almost all of the world's wealth is on man's side, while most of the world's work is on woman's.*

UN Statistics compiled during the decade show that women perform 2/3 of the world's work, receive 1/10 of its income, and own 1/100 of its property (*Women: A World Report*, New Internationalist publication, 1985).

Forum '85 workshops dealt not only with the problems faced by women today, but also with solutions. In workshop after workshop women discussed strategies they have employed for change. Women from around the globe participated in panel discussions about solutions to their problems that had improved their lives. There was energy, creativity and drive: women learned from one another what it is possible to achieve. Women in India talked about how they organized a trade union for self-employed home based workers. They spoke of forming a women's bank for illiterate rural women so they could obtain loans and credit. They used diversification of income to strengthen demands for decent wages.

A black woman from Missouri explained how a women's organization transformed their public housing project from a "hell hole" of drugs, urine, thieves, garbage, rats, shootings and terrorism to a home that was a showcase for the area. They staged a rent strike, took over management of the complex, taught vandals basic carpentry and renovation and employed them to fix up burned out, wrecked units. In the end, besides owning their improved housing complex, they built new units, set up day cares, a cannery complex, laundry service, shopping mall, medical clinic and provided scholarships to send kids from the housing project to college.

Rural Greek women who had worked thirty years in the home and the fields but who didn't have thirty shillings of their own to buy a present for a grandchild, set up a rural tourist cooperative with rooms in their own homes. They improved the homes, started a cooperative restaurant, developed an educational program for rural women, and set up a rural crafts industry and market outlet. In Peru, two feminists ran as independents for political office. They succeeded in incorporating women's themes into the election campaign, provided a forum for women's issues, and got elected. An Indian woman wrote fifteen songs on the theme of religious patriarchy and its oppression of women. She also wrote books of rhymes for children around male-female roles. In Pakistan, women formed a publishing house to publish women's writing, and in Brazil a group of women published a national feminist newspaper.

At Nairobi Third World women dominated in numbers and the dominant issues were Third World women's issues; indeed, many women from developed countries had come to learn what issues were crucial to their sisters in the Third World, rather than to press their own concerns. The most striking example of this was the question of how political struggles impinge on the women of the Third World. Before I left Vancouver, I attended a "briefing" at which women from the Jewish Council, the YWCA, and the Status of Women stressed how important it was that the Nairobi conference stick to "women's" issues and not get sidetracked into discussions of "male" issues such as the Palestinian question, apartheid, the Iran-Iraq war, etc. Throughout the conference the fallacy of

this view was underlined. How can Palestinian women or South African women press for "equality" amid racial discrimination? Iranian women were eager to point out the detrimental effects of war on their lives. In fact, this was one of the real strengths of the conference: "ordinary" women from both sides had a chance to discuss these questions together and to clearly declare the realities they experienced as a result of "political" circumstances. For the most part, this dialogue was reasoned and calm and gave each side an insight into the other on a person-to-person basis.

The issue of the links between development and disarmament was also raised. One example: a single nuclear submarine costs as much as the entire education budgets of 23 developing countries for 160 million schoolchildren. Discussions and dialogue took place in the Peace Tent every day, and also in many workshops and informal lawn discussions.

There were other vehicles for learning:

- A film forum screened women's films and videos from around the world, with films showing all day, every day.
- A Tech and Tools exhibit displayed appropriate technological devices to aid women specifically, with the motto, "If it's not appropriate for women, it's not appropriate."
- The Forum had a strong cultural component, with a French cultural centre, Kenyan cultural displays and events.

- Many workshops used song to focus on issues, as in the chorus, "woman time a-come, oh yeah. You better be prepared, a new day is dawning."
- And guerilla theatre groups dramatized other common problems faced by women – lack of adequate health care; the responses of politicians to women's demands ("Wacha Matata," stop making trouble); effects of colonization; causes of oppression.

Many informal talks took place with interesting women from all over the world: on the lawn at lunch, in bank and postal queues, over coffee, walking to campus, in vans and buses. The contradictions of Nairobi in themselves represented an interesting lesson. The world of the official conference was one of Western style luxury hotels, skyscrapers, expensive craft stores, the university and Kenyatta Centre, posh restaurants. To maintain the image, officials had done a thorough clean-up of Nairobi streets – beggars, prostitutes and petty thieves had all been rounded up and transported well beyond city limits. Walks beyond the downtown core revealed street vendors selling woven baskets, corn, bananas, shoe shines and haircuts, people squatting over charcoal braziers, women carrying heavy loads, idle men with no work standing about on the street, and middle-class residential districts heavily barricaded with high stone and chain link fences topped with barbed wire. And on



University of Nairobi campus: site of UN End of Decade for Women Conference and Forum '85. Credit: Tina Horne

the outskirts of Nairobi were three very large squatter's settlements.

As well as attending the conference, NGO people were encouraged to visit women's projects in rural areas. Despite a fear that these were a few, isolated "model" women's projects we were being shown – rather than a widespread trend to fund women's development projects – we found the rural projects we visited to be a monument to women's drive, creativity and hard work. In all the villages and slum settlements, the women seemed to be the motivating force behind development. And although already overworked with home, family and growing all their food plus some cash crops, these women somehow found the energy to do extra work on the projects besides. And the projects we saw were working and making life a little more positive for the women involved: they provided a little more income and a lot more respect – self-respect and respect from the village. Women were beginning to see they could take control and improve their lives and the lives of their children. Some of the projects we visited included a spinning and weaving workshop in Kibera, a bakery and shops complex in Machakos, and an agricultural project in a squatter's slum outside Nairobi. Although the amount of hard work was awesome, progress was being made. There was at least some government funding of women's projects, with women project officers. But there was also much more to be done to make the lives of these women and children easier.

Forum '85 had many positive results. The presence of 13,000 concerned women in Nairobi is a clear signal to the UN and to governments all over the world that women's issues are of vital concern to the well-being of all nations and that governments ignore them at their peril. National and global women's networks were formed and strengthened. Women analyzed the progress of the past decade and discussed together effective strategies and proposals for the future. And each individual woman who went came home with new knowledge and a new commitment to women's issues and development, creating a ripple effect all over the world. The Nairobi conference was not an "End of Decade" Conference that marked the end of women's development. Instead it is the beginning of a new era for women's advancement to the year 2000.



The message is clear for NGO's: women's development is the only path to real community development in the Third World, as women hold the key to primary health care, nutrition, food production, education and lowered population growth. Meaningful development can not take place when half the world's population is subjugated. The United Nations and governments the world over are more aware than ever of this vital need to improve the status of women; more and more governments have set up women's ministries and made women in development a key component in overseas aid and development programs. NGO's in Canada have a responsibility to consider women's development in their overseas projects and in their organizations at home.

The Nairobi conference has demonstrated the importance of a women's perspective on development. In fact, the future of the world might just depend on it!

*Janet Laidlaw was in Nairobi as a Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) "Women in Development" Working Group delegate; CCIC, founded in 1968, is a national coalition of more than 100 Canadian non-governmental organizations working for international development overseas and development education in Canada. She is a regional co-ordinator for Canada World Youth. Her expertise as a woman farmer derives from her experience as the owner-operator of a 400-head livestock (Angora goats) operation in Cariboo, British Columbia.*

## UNDERSTOOD

The only desirable companions are jet-set models.  
Only jet-set models make the cover of Vogue.

I covered poetry for Vogue.

Blondes have more fun.  
Large-nosed people have less fun.  
Senior singles live on yellow submarine sandwiches.  
Writing poetry is a hobby.

The only woman visible to the naked eye  
is the Playmate of the Month.  
Subtly beautiful women are invisible after dusk.  
Subtle women are invisible.

Begonias are in, petunias are passé.  
"Passé" is passé.  
Pickled Pepper Power

vs. Nipple Power:  
my nine-year-old nephew likes  
Jackie Onassis,  
the newborn like Maggie Trudeau.  
Hairdressers know.

I have no hairdresser,  
begonias have no scent, but just the same we like to subtle  
up against your nose  
Writing poetry is an escape

Like peace from war.  
Poppies.  
Poppies vs Hobbies:  
his scarred face at peace  
his scarred face in pleasure  
his scarred face in passion

Female poets are called poetesses.  
No one who went to school with  
your younger sister can ever  
be a poetess.  
Poetesses live in distance castles.  
Poetesses have no taste.

Poetesses are important for posterity.  
They record truth.  
Truth is passé.

## OVERHEARD (a found poem)

I'm tired of being a dumb blonde.  
I'm going to go sit by Marvyne.

*Marvyne Jenoff*  
Mississauga, Ontario