THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL IN KENYA:
A REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S STUDIES INSTITUTE

Anne Sisson Runyan

L'auteur médite sur ses expériences comme participante à l'Institut International des Etudes de la Femme tenu au Kenya avant et durant le Forum NGO de 1985 à Nairobi. En décrivant le travail de ce group d'études trans-culturel comprenant des femmes de l'Amérique du Nord et d'Afrique, Anne Sisson Runyan examine les multiples implications politiques et culturelles qui peuvent être soulevées même à l'intérieur d'un petit groupe de femmes quand il s'agit de travailler dans un contexte international. Elle recommande q'une plus grande attention soit portée aux modes de structure et de construction de nos groupes et de notre travail afin de faciliter l'organisation des femmes sur le plan international; en effet, l'organisation internationale des femmes est requise afin de poursuivre les buts de la Decennie.

Several months have passed since the thirty-one of us who participated in the International Women's Studies Institute in Kenya sadly parted as the NGO Forum in Nairobi came to a close. In retrospect, the community we created through five weeks of intensive study of the impact of development theory and practice on women through seminars, field work, and NGO Forum participation provided a strong base for examining our personal and political commonalities and differences as women. The joys and frustrations we shared together enhanced our analyses, our experiences, and our commitments. My only regret is that we did not have long enough to work through as a group the many issues such a process evokes.

Dedicated to the study of women's issues in cross-cultural perspective, the International Women's Studies Institute (IWSI) has had ongoing programs in Greece, Israel, and Egypt over the past few years, but the 1985 Kenya program was the first of its kind, initiated to coincide with the UN End of the Decade for Women Conference and the NGO Forum. The small, California-based staff of IWSI (which is accredited by San Jose State University), with the help of a Kenya-based development coordinator, had envisaged a two-fold process: "first, to bring together a study team encompassing a wide range of expertise and experience in Women in Development to work on the integration of theoretical and practical perspectives; and second, to report on and provide analysis of the 1985 NGO Forum for delegates to the governmental UN conference and persons throughout the world who were unable to attend the Nairobi meetings."[1]

Partial funding by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), one of the few grants made to NGO projects for the Forum by the U.S. government and which was to prove problematic later, enabled thirteen women from five African countries to participate in the Institute with twelve North American women. IWSI staff rounded out the complement. All together, we represented Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Botswana, Egypt, Canada, and the United States; brought perspectives from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, education, law, communications, literature, agriculture, women's studies, international relations, and development; and had experience in all kinds of grass-roots organizations ranging from women's resource centres and political action groups to income-generating and social service projects for women. Our "family" of women ranged in age from 70 to 4, the latter age group represented by two daughters, one African and the other American, whose presence immeasurably added to our sense of community.

After gathering in Nairobi and being addressed by a "herstoric" panel that included Pamela Mboya, Director of the Kenya Government Secretariat; Eddah Gachukia, Chairman of the Kenya NGO Forum Secretariat; Esther Wandeka, Head of the Kenya Women's Bureau; and Theresa Shitakha, National Chairman of Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Kenya's national women's organization), we went on to Mombasa. There, our work as a group focussed on the needs of rural women, bringing us in contact with such diverse public and private agencies as Women's World Banking, Kenya's Ministry of Finance, the Commercial Bank of Africa, the Rural Industrial Development Trust, and Partnership for Productivity Service Foundation. Through the efforts of two of our participants, Elvina Matua of Tototo Home Industries and Louisa Owiti of the YWCA, we met with fourteen women's groups in villages throughout south-eastern and central Kenya, learning about their organizing and productive work as well as sharing stories about all our lives as women.

Our seminar work entailed a mix of approaches involving each of us taking responsibility to prepare presentations on a myriad of subjects germane to women in development, and small group work in which we critiqued development strategies and brainstormed on meeting rural women's needs based on the actual projects the development workers in our group were engaged in. One of our sessions, involving a comparison analysis of the varied oppressions experienced by girls, single women, married women, and widows in urban, rural, and refugee settings, was taped by the Voice of Kenya and broadcast just before the NGO Forum. The image of us excitedly huddled around the radio listening to our words from our first week together on the eve of our last week together remains a poignant memory for me.

Indeed, it is impossible for me to separate the meaning of the "Decade for Women" from the Institute community-building process. Although tentative with each other at first, we quickly shared intimacies and found friendships, partly as the result of intensive day-to-day contact, rotating roommates, and "Women in Community" sessions – special times set aside for us to express our feelings on and personal experiences with family, relationships, work, etc.

When we looked at "development," our analysis was grounded in the actual experience of the African women who had first-hand knowledge of the double-

edged sword that Western approaches represent. This perspective, coupled with the information North American women provided on the far less-than-benign toll Western "development" approaches have had on women in so-called "developed" countries, laid bare the numerous contradictions in "development" work, even when it is "targetted" at women. Each development site we visited, while meeting wonderfully strong women and forging links of solidarity, served to heighten our anger about the problem of Western "aid" and the strings attached to it.

We all felt strongly that we could not look at development in isolation from the other themes of the Decade – equality and peace. Whether it was through Janet's stories of periodic *coup* attempts at her radio station where she does rural programming in Ghana, Dorine's description of her dangerous work helping South African refugees, Judith's concerns about the safety of her friends in Lebanon and Central America, or my presentation on the recent international women's peace conference held in Halifax, we easily linked militarization with development problems. Equality proved to be a harder subject to deal with as Willie and Karen challenged the racism and classism plaguing the women's movement in the West, while Rosemary warned that the overlay of common law on traditional law in many African countries had not resulted in substantial gains for women. The question became "equal to whom and on what terms?"

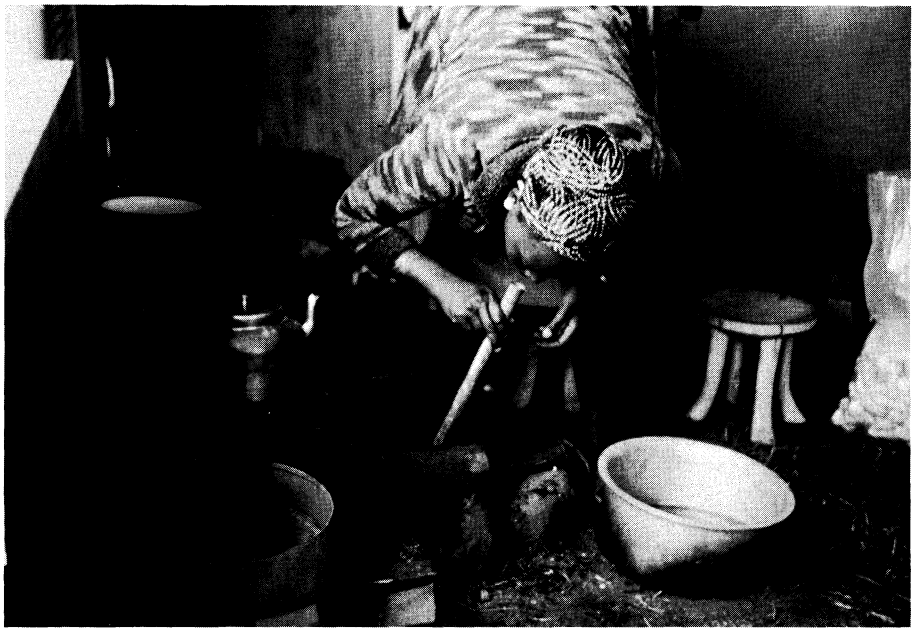
To further explore these issues, we turned to some documents prepared for the Decade Conference and the NGO Forum. While we found it flawed in many ways, the *Forward-Looking Strategies to the Year 2000* document did provide some useful baseline data and principles, but it was the DAWN (Development Alternatives for a New Era) report, *Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (a summary of which precedes my article), that really excited us. Initiated in 1984 in Bangalore, Pakistan by a gathering of women primarily from the non-aligned nations, this report was published for distribution at the NGO Forum in Nairobi. By reframing feminism as a struggle against *all* oppressions (not just a strategy for attaining equality with white, Western men – a goal that could essentially be interpreted by Third World peoples as "I want to be your oppressor") and

Betty Friedan addressing Forum '85 rally *Credit: Sylvia Spring*

linking the worldwide crises of food-fuel-water, economic dependency, militarization, and fundamentalism that disproportionately affect women, the DAWN report provided a more holistic picture of the massive inequities inherent in the current world system.

This report, too, is not without flaws. Criticisms during the Forum and since have ranged from its stopping short of naming the sources of these crises (such as capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy) to its very academic treatment and style.[2] Our group found it lacking in the "how to change this state of affairs" area for, other than describing the array of women's groups and their sometimes contradictory efforts, it provides few ideas on future organizing and/or re-organizing. The workshops sponsored by the DAWN group at the Forum, attendance at which was given high priority among our IWSI group, entailed greater elaboration on local and national organizing techniques in different regions of the world. However, the structure of the Forum itself, which was not designed for the development of unified statements or actions as a result of its lack of plenaries and its "unofficial" nature, prevented the kind of mass organizing that the DAWN report's litany of systemic abuses calls for.

Indeed, the diverse, but fragmentary experience of the Forum led, at least partially, to a concomitant breakdown within our IWSI group. The, at best fragile and, at worst, false sense of commonality we thought we had achieved on the coast (an economic and geographic periphery) was sorely tested as we returned to Nairobi (an economic and geographic centre) to face all kinds of naively unanticipated external agendas, ranging from the NGO hotel evictions crisis (which ended up in our case with all of us tripling up in small rooms), to the intense "security" presence and hassles (from whom were they protecting us?). Internally, we, who had spent hours on end mostly with each other over three weeks, were now fanning out to cover the Forum and to prepare a report on it. A major task, to be sure, but one that was exacerbated as we explored, late at night after long days at the Forum, how, why, and for whom such a report would be written. Finally, the spectre of USAID funding was raising its ugly head as the African women, the funding recipients, began to reveal their concerns about what was expected of them under the arrangement. Too, the dual focus of the Institute which sought to communicate, on the one hand with government policy-makers and on the other hand with women on development issues, started to seem unworkable and questionable. While preparing and submitting a report to the Kenyan government was less problematic as a few of the Kenyan participants were tapped at the last minute to be Kenyan governmental delegates at the official Decade conference, a report *for* USAID was another



Tech and Tools at Forum '85 *Credit: Sylvia Spring*

matter. Unclear about what was expected of any of us and unwilling to psych out or bow to what that might be, but committed to producing a group report, we proceeded to attend those workshops and events we wanted to, many of which were explicitly focussed on development, but also many of which encompassed the other themes and subthemes of the Decade.

We reported on and analyzed what we could in the time we had and submitted 20 recommendations which, among other things, called for a reorientation in development policies and national priorities, to the Kenyan government before it made its country report to the Decade Conference. We also lobbied other government delegates from our countries of origin at a gathering that IWSI hosted mid-way through the Forum but just before the start of the Decade Conference. As could be expected, USAID was not interested in any of our work associated with peace or macro-economic redistribution, although IWSI staffers report some interest at lower policy levels within USAID in some of our recommendations. More important, each Institute participant has received a copy of the full report we produced to use where she can.

Going through this somewhat painful process was yet another lesson in not only the contradictions of government involvement in women's work, but also the contradictions facing us as women engaged in international and cross-cultural organizing. By the time we got to the Forum, it was clear that we had all come with different agendas based upon where we were situated on the socio-economic spectrum and/or what real or perceived responsibilities and obligations we had to a range of organizations and governments. During certain shining moments, to some extent we did and we still do, despite the attenuation of time and distance, declare ourselves as a group of women, of feminists, of friends working together for a better world. Still, as those of us participants who are white, North American feminists look back, there is little question that we are ill-practiced in dealing with our privilege and our cultural myopia. Had we to do the Institute over, I feel a stronger emphasis on the "personal as political" would be in order. Had we really examined the structure of our group, as well as the manifest and latent reasons we were there and the obligations we felt, a very different picture and process might have emerged. Operating as we did on an individualistic, small group, cross-cultural model allowed us for too long to deny the structural inequities that existed in the group. These included an all-white, American Institute staff that essentially set the agenda; one black American feminist amongst numerous white American feminists; one Canadian woman (not counting myself as an American woman living in Canada) amidst many Americans; one woman each from Ghana, Botswana, and Egypt as opposed to several from Kenya and Zimbabwe; an uneven distribution of age groups, isolating the very young and the very old; a Western contingent of academic women working primarily in academe in many fields other than development in the face of an African contingent of women, many of whom were academically trained, but for whom development work in the field was their major occupation; and, of course, the funding differences, with some women subsidized by their universities, others paying on their own through loans or savings, and the African women receiving subsidy and per diems from USAID.

Without paying attention to these very important details, a given majority perspective often ruled in the context of our day-to-day work, creating minority feelings and minority silence. Our work would have been better served by a process that enhanced our sensitivity not just to "different" perspectives but, more importantly, to currently "oppressed" perspectives and positions that should have been at the centre of our planning and discussions. *In fact, the problems of development were taking place in our own group, but we only began to see it towards the end of our time together.*

Our final night under the stars on the land of the Maasai provided space and time for us to heal some of the wounds resulting from not taking better stock of our condition(s) as women. The goddess gave us gifts, we sang, we danced, we laughed, and we cried. Something worked, for we all experienced changes. But for those of us North American participants who returned "home" to find a "domesticated"[3] women's movement still only marginally interested in international organizing, communicating the need for change has been difficult. One-hour panel discussions to groups which have not structurally or ideologically equipped themselves for internalizing the messages from Halifax, Nairobi, and the entire Decade seem to have little effect so far. Indeed, despite the problems, the major beauty of an experience like the Institute lies in the opportunity it gives women to live and breathe our own issues for a relatively long period of time in a variety of settings. My sadness is that the time is now over for me and the other participants of IWSI Kenya '85, but my vision is that such evolving experiments will soon be seen

as necessities for women's worldwide liberation.

[1]"The International Women's Studies Institute Report on the 1985 NGO Forum," unpublished report by the participants, p. 1.

[2]These particular criticisms were contained in an address to the development plenary at the NGO Forum by Irene M. Santiago, co-founder of PILIPINA, Secretariat Coordinator of the Asian Women's Research and Action Network, and currently a fellow at the International Women's Tribune Center in New York, where the DAWN report is now available for purchase.

[3]The term "domesticated" comes from a sister IWSI participant, Judith White, currently a professor of literature at Queen's College in Charlotte, North Carolina, whose many insights helped me a great deal with this article. "Domesticated" in this context refers not only to a nation-bound women's movement, but also to one that has been "tamed" to suit the needs of women's oppressors.

Forum '85 rally *Credit: Sylvia Spring*

Anne Sisson Runyan is a feminist peace researcher and activist currently working for the Voice of Women, a national women's peace organization based in Toronto. A Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at The American University in Washington, D.C., she has attended International Women's Studies Institutes in the Middle East and Africa and is focussing her dissertation on the international women's peace conference held in Halifax in June 1985, "The Urgency for True Security: Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace."