

The Journal



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WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

Women in Nairobi Backdrop for the future

Increasing abuse of alcohol and other drugs is causing growing concern in The Third World, as it continues to in developed countries. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, in the face of such immediate and overwhelming problems as poverty, drought, and starvation, little was said about it formally during the United Nations Decade for Women Conference, or the overlapping Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum, held in Nairobi, Kenya in July (The Journal, August, July, June, May).

While individual women attending both gatherings spoke readily of their anxiety about the impact of alcohol and other drug use on youth and family life in their countries, in the final consensus document, *Forward Looking Strategies*, only two sentences in one of more than 300 resolutions touched fleetingly on the subject.

Professionals in the addictions and related health fields, particularly those who are women, may deeply regret the lack of acknowledgement of, or attention to, alcohol and other drug-related issues at the meetings.

But, to begin to understand is to begin to be able to help.

The resolution that included the reference to drugs reads as follows: "Efforts should be intensified to eradicate trafficking in drugs and to

disseminate information on their ill effects. These should include education programs to promote the proper prescription and informed use of drugs. Efforts should also be strengthened to eliminate all prac-

tices detrimental to the health of women and children."

Practices "detrimental to the health of women and children" is a carefully-cloaked reference to such controversial customs as female circumcision.

That resolution itself, but also the meetings, hint at the extreme breadth and depth of the problems that the half of the world's population who are women face. In this first special section, The Journal's JOAN HOLLOBON, contributing editor, reports from the meetings.

Her stories reflect the context in which addiction professionals now serve around the world, and in which some may see their past, and others may find their future.

The Editor



Joan Hollobon



Looking to the future: some of the thousands of women who met in Nairobi to review the United Nations Decade for Women — 1975 to 1985 — and to set course for the next

Women in Nairobi

NAIROBI, Kenya — A United Nations report, *The State of the World's Women 1985*, notes: "Thirty years after the United Nations first announced its commitment to equality between men and women in its Charter of 1945, concern over the continuing unequal status of women led to the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year."

"For the first time in history, the eyes of the world were focused on that half of its population who, by virtue of an accident of birth, perform two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of its income, and own less than one-hundredth of its property."

Everywhere, in the developed and in the developing world, women work twice as many hours as men, but much of their work is "undervalued, unpaid, and unrecognized," and "the final insult . . . domestic work is looked down on as not being 'real' work at all, because it is unpaid."

In Africa, where women do three-quarters of the agricultural work, much of this, too, is overlooked because it is unpaid — it is just "women's work."

Their work is made immeasurably harder for many African women, and their health eroded, through lack of water. Many must travel miles to fetch water for their families. Some leave at dusk, sleep at the water hole, and return before dawn — this in addition to the usual roles of caring for families and working in the fields.

The World Health Organization estimates that, excluding China, 25% of urban dwellers and 71% of rural people in developing countries lack safe drinking water, while 47% and 87% respectively have no adequate sanitation. "Small wonder that an estimated eight million children die each year of disease that might have been prevented by sufficient clean water from a nearby tap," the UN report says.

In Kenya, many of the nomadic, cattle-raising Masai people in the Rift valley, less than two hours from Nairobi by car, suffer from trachoma, a blinding, bacterial eye infection, which is preventable by washing the eyes daily with even a cupful of water.

For these people, who lost hundreds of cattle this year to drought, a cupful of water is a luxury.

Frequent pregnancies also take a severe toll of women in The Third World. Nearly half of them lack any medical care or trained doctors or midwives to assist at delivery. More than 500,000 women die in childbirth every year in Africa and Asia, three of every 1,000 mothers in Ecuador, and up to 20 per 1,000 in Honduras, the UN report says.

The African birthrate is three times higher than Europe's, and 2.8 times that of North America. With a population growth

rate of 3% (50% higher than that of the rest of The Third World), Africa will double its 500 million population within 23 years.

Kenya has almost doubled its population from about 10 million to an estimated 19 million in the past 20 years. Nairobi now has one million people and traffic to rival Manhattan on a bad day.

Illiteracy is gradually being reduced, but it is still worse among women: the UN report says that in 1980, 73% of the world's women, as opposed to 48% of men, were unable to read or write.

Third World people often sacrifice to pay school fees and provide books and school uniforms for their sons. For their sons, it's an investment; but not for their daughters. A visit to a Masai elementary school in the Rift Valley showed one small girl among 20 to 30 boys.

Girls are less likely to get a paid job and, if they marry, will be contributing to another's home anyway.

Add to these problems drought, famine, creeping deserts, cultural changes bringing economic, environmental, and psychological burdens, and it becomes fairly obvious why alcoholism and other drug abuse issues were low priorities at the UN meetings here.



What then did these two huge gatherings achieve? In terms of instant action, nationally or internationally, probably not much, but, in the long-term, likely a lot.

As Walter McLean, Canada's then-secretary of state, said before the Nairobi conferences, the significance of the UN's 10-year focus on women's issues has been that in every participating country "it has thrown a signal into the bureaucracy" that these issues are important.

This was advanced at Nairobi. Hundreds of proposals for the improvement of women's situations in health, economics, law, employment, housing, and many other areas are now enshrined in the consensus document, endorsed by 157 participating countries.

Attendance at the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980 led Mr McLean to warn, prior to Nairobi, (*The Journal*, July) that the two overlapping meetings would be totally different in character.

He was concerned that women fired up by enthusiasm at the NGO Forum, where participants were deeply committed to women's issues, might be disappointed and even disillusioned at the political gamesmanship they would witness at the official UN Conference.

Indeed, this happened: women's issues were used as a pretext to drag in the perennial international problems of the Middle East and South Africa simply to score political points.



Woman power: United States feminist Betty Friedan (centre left) says United Nations De

Even the NGO Forum became politicized, particularly toward the end, with placard wavers, marchers, and propagandists backing opposing views.

One day, for example, two small groups of Iranian women were simultaneously telling different stories about the Khomeini regime.

Two middle-aged exiles in western dress described the horrors visited on women under the present government, while 100 yards away — across the grass — three young women in black chadors, praised the same regime as a protector of women.

Palestinian-Israeli antagonisms disrupted an NGO workshop, until the Kenyan chairman firmly told both groups they were abusing Kenyan hospitality and must take their arguments elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the official UN meeting of governmental delegations drew attention

to important issues basic to women — a through them to the whole of society. Finally, the meeting accepted a document that recognized the need for change, even if most of the reforms are likely to take decades rather than years.

The achievements of the unofficial meeting were entirely different.

The NGO Forum was not intended to produce documents and resolutions: it was a gathering, women talking to women. Many hundreds discovered that regardless of race, skin color, nationality, culture, dress, education, language, wealth, or poverty, more common interests and concerns linked than divided them. In a shrinking nuclear-shadowed world, that alone is reason to be sniffed at.

The Forum was an extraordinary event in its size and diversity, and also in the atmosphere of genuine friendliness and co-



Iranian women: praising the Khomeini regime as 'a protector of women'

Drug laws spark petition

NAIROBI — Drugs are becoming a problem in Nigeria, and this country of 90 million people is taking drastic measures.

A poster at the NGO Forum sought signatures on a petition to the Nigerian government to repeal the death sentence passed last March on a 36-year-old mother

of three children for possession of cocaine. News reports in the Western press during the conference said three men had been shot, and a 20-year-old woman sentenced to death, for drug possession.

Draconian as these sentences are, many Africans seem to consider them justified.

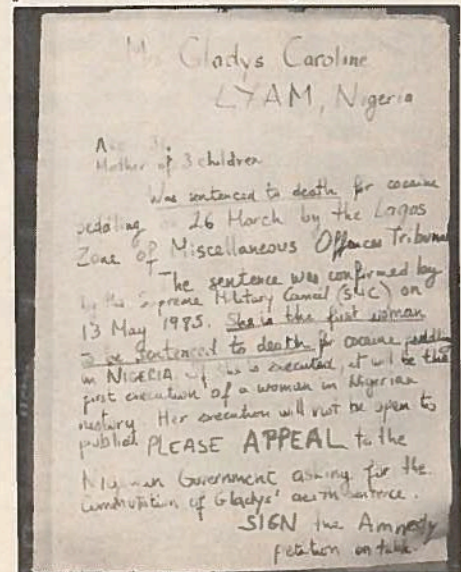
"They know the penalty," one Nigerian woman shrugged. "We just hope it will work. We have held seminars on drugs, supporting the government action."

Simi Johnson, leader of the Nigerian delegation to the UN Conference, told *The Journal* the Nigerian government is concerned about global drug problems. Cocaine does not originate in Nigeria, and the government is determined to combat the use of Nigeria as a route to transport illicit drugs from countries that "thrive on the export of drugs" to users in Europe or elsewhere.

"We don't want our children to live and die junkies," she said.

Dr Johnson, a dental surgeon, is chairwoman of the Nigerian National Committee on Women and Development. She gave short shrift to concerns about the harshness of death sentences.

"Nigeria has no need to apologize to anyone for her actions. We don't want this in our country," she said.



Appeal for life of Gladys Caroline: 'we don't want our children to die junkies'

Third World concerns —

The influx of thousands of Western women to the UN Decade of Women conferences here led one cynic to assume that "obviously" this was another case of the developed world talking down to developing countries and bringing in all kinds of "foreign and irrelevant" notions.

An NGO workshop on the legal and health status of women showed how, in fact, many workshops quickly focused on Third World issues, and how readily and frankly women from developing countries spoke out even on controversial questions.

The scheduled chairwoman and panel failed to turn up. So, after a short wait, an Australian woman suggested to people in the crowded room they should simply invite speakers from the floor on issues that concerned them.

The discussion began with the legal issues affecting contraception and reproduction, since frequent births affect the health of both mothers and children. The World Fertility Survey in a study in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan found that babies born within a year of one another were nearly three times as likely to die before their first birthday as babies born far years apart.

Then, discussion turned to the controversial subject of female circumcision. In the past, Westerners opposing female circumcision often have been accused of insensitivity to other cultures, but now many African women are campaigning vigorously against the practice, which is not universal in Africa.

A woman from Cameroon made an impassioned speech calling the practice

Backdrop for the future



Women is 'a beginning'

was almost limitless: the official program was organized under three themes, equality, development, and peace. Scores of specific subjects fell within categories such as health, education, agriculture, trade, commerce, political and legal equality, housing. An example of treatment of a housing subject, for instance, was a discussion on access for women to housing credit-schemes.

Subjects were also considered for their impact on different groups, such as migrant, destitute, disabled, or homeless women.

A few randomly-chosen titles from the NGO Forum workshop program exemplify the breadth of interest there: impact of race, sex, and class on women; women, state power, and politics; working conditions for women in Japan; advancement of women in Africa; women in prison; creative power of youth through spiritual life; community health; traditional practices affecting health of women and children in Africa; women, energy, and environment; domestic violence against women; and, workplace exploitation.



By the time additions as a subject moves onto the main agenda of such conferences, the need may no longer exist — the range of other problems now is so obviously immense.

A woman from Madagascar at the Nairobi conferences revealed one more problem — one the meetings may help to change.

She refused to give her name because she feared she would get into trouble for telling a foreigner something that might appear to case discredit on her country: she and her country-women had been warned by government officials to be circumspect.

Women from some other countries were at even greater risk; an Iranian woman living in exile in Britain said she feared for the lives of her family if her identity became known.

An Australian delegate, in a letter to the Forum's daily newspaper, *Forum 85*, protested "the surveillance of workshop participants by repressive military regimes."

She said that in a workshop on West Papua a male Indonesian photographer had taken photographs of all the women who spoke on the rights of West Papuan women. "A more sinister practice is the use of representatives of oppressed minorities to speak against their own people," Wendy Poussard wrote.

This had happened at the workshop, but the women were hustled away before they could talk to the refugee West Papuan

women, said Ms Poussard.

But, the value of this remarkable gathering was exemplified by the Madagascar woman's attitude. Despite her fears, she spoke openly to this foreign writer.

Meeting so many women from other countries was "wonderful," she said.

"In Madagascar, we are very isolated. This meeting has broken down a lot of my prejudices. I am becoming more open-minded now."



My country is the whole world: thousands of women sign for international peace

Alcoholism hits island's educated

A Madagascar woman attending the NGO forum said alcoholism is increasing among the educated classes in that huge island in the Indian Ocean.

The government is beginning to take action, mainly in the form of organizing meetings and seminars to discuss the dangers of alcohol abuse.

But, she doubts this approach alone will have much impact; the people most in need of educating are the least likely to attend, she said.

Churches in Madagascar speak out against drinking, and alcohol abuse is touched on in schools during health classes. The press is also beginning to ad-

dress the issue, she said.

Her own husband did not drink until he was in his 40s; a promotion then moved him "up in the world." He thought it "the civilized thing to do," offering guests alcohol.

Now, alcohol has become a problem in their home, but the woman's husband refuses to admit he cannot control his drinking.

While drugs have not yet become a problem, heavy drinking leading to drunken brawls has always been a part of the lifestyle of the coastal people in Madagascar, she told *The Journal*. But, this is not seen as a problem by them or by others.

"It's part of their cultural pattern, it's accepted as their way of life."

operation that prevailed most of the time, despite the size of the gathering, organizational frustrations, and the sometimes rancorous political jockeying.

Estimates of numbers vary between 10,000 and 13,000; another 3,000 people attended the UN conference. The Forum was often chaotic, but even this had its advantages: chaos frequently gave birth to spontaneity.

If a workshop leader or panel did not turn up, other women took the initiative. Often, these unstructured meetings were the most rewarding, providing opportunity for spontaneous input from the floor which often was more useful and interesting than many of the prepared presentations.

Discussions begun in a workshop were often finished in informal groups on the lawn outside.

The range of interest at both meetings



Kenyan Leah Oliver Mwakisambi (l), Laura Mugambi: developing human resources



Village woman: water purifiers from earthenware jugs

health, legal issues — dominate discussion

"abuse of women endangering health and which has to be stopped."

Gladys Silo Endeley said even in London doctors are paid highly for the surgery. Some African families living in Britain are convinced something terrible will happen to a girl who does not undergo circumcision. She said a woman in Africa came to her in tears; when the woman refused to have her little girl circumcised, her mother and sisters grabbed the child forcibly, and took her to a native doctor who carried out the procedure without anesthetic or sterilized tools.

Ms Endeley said she knew "even educated doctors" who believed in the practice until shown a film of a screaming child undergoing an unanesthetized operation.

No issue is more sensitive, more sur-

rounded by taboos, or more influenced by tradition. Changing ingrained cultural patterns is accomplished only through conflict, and at emotional and psychological cost.

A Kenyan woman said girls who do not go through circumcision fear they will not be married.

"It should be done, otherwise they will be outcasts from their families."

She told of girls who had run away to avoid it, and others who had run away to have the operation. One mother found her daughter sleeping on the floor because she was bleeding so badly from the crude surgery.

The extent of the surgery varies from removal of the clitoris alone to infibulation, in which extensive excision is followed by

stitching to leave only a small opening.

A Sudanese physician, Fathia Aimahmoud, MD, said the subsequent severe scarring impedes birth so that an obstetrician cannot assess labor or even determine the size of the woman's pelvis.

The result frequently is a brain-damaged baby or a vesicovaginal fistula, a tear in the wall between bladder and vagina creating urinary incontinence.

These fistulas are common in Africa because of the lack of health and obstetrical care, Dr Aimahmoud said.

Fatma Moma of Nigeria said in Northern Nigeria Moslem girls are married at nine, often suffering "terrible tears," including fistulas, when they give birth at 10 or 12 years.

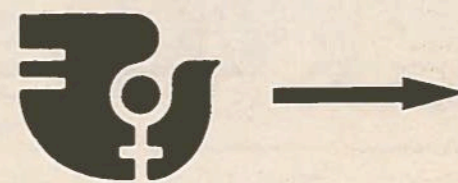
Husbands often immediately divorce women with fistulas, many of whom, in

turn, hang around hospitals — sometimes for several years — hoping to get surgical repair.

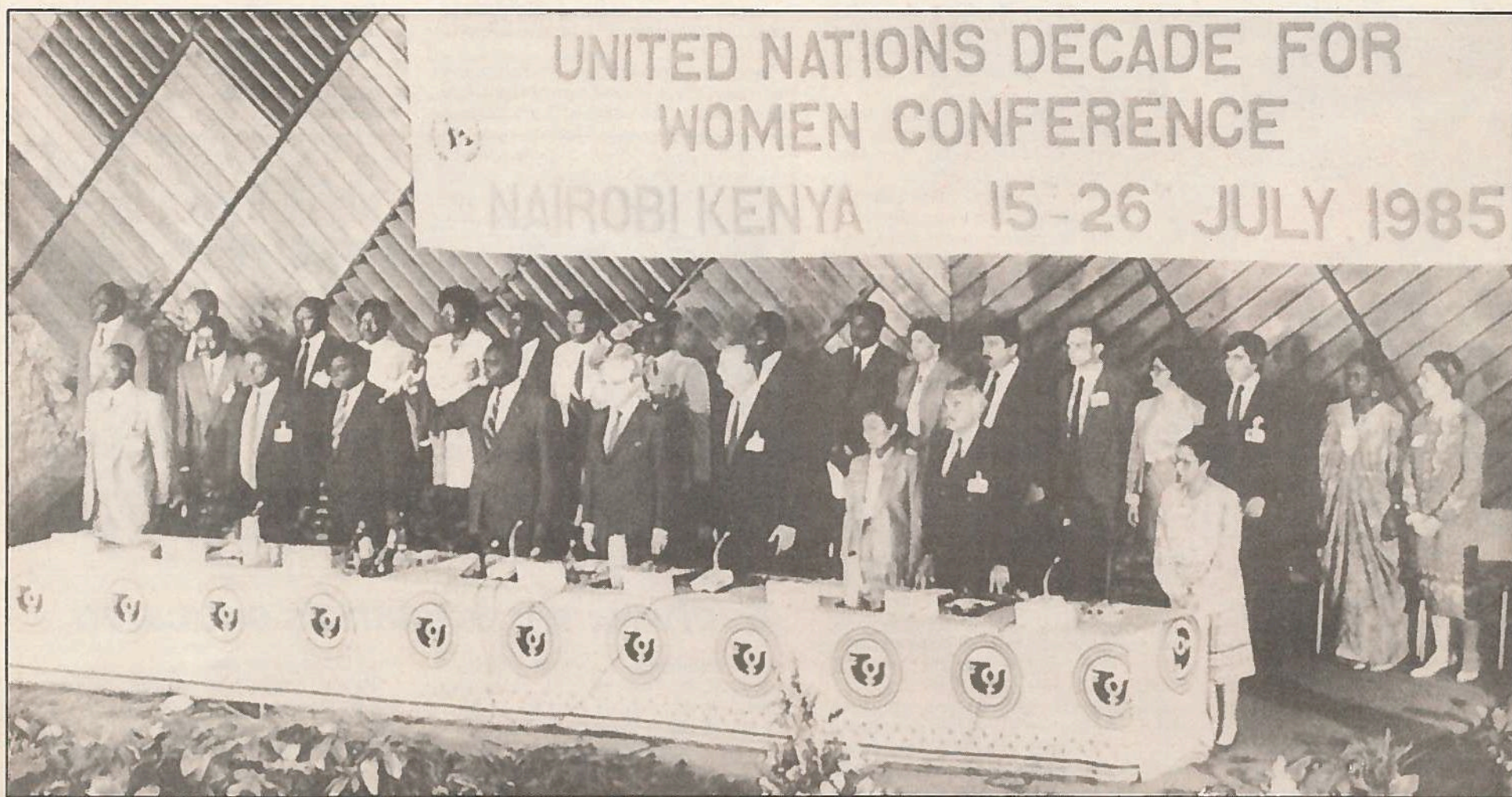
Dr Aimahmoud said female circumcision should be seen as an issue of maternal and child mortality and morbidity, not a cultural matter.

She said she had heard a man from UNESCO say it was not a health issue, but an issue of "human rights and dignity."

"Women don't die from dignity, but from infection and in childbirth."



Women in Nairobi Backdrop for the future



A minority welcome: United Nations and government officials — mostly male — dominate the opening ceremonies. They were soon to be dramatically out-numbered by women

Forum 85 — rich and poor, the impact was mutual

Forum 85, the NGO conference, was the first conference of such magnitude — between 14,000 and 16,000 people — held in a Third World country, and the impact on Kenya and on the visitors was mutual. Holding the conference in Kenya allowed more Third World women to attend, particularly African women.

The Kenya setting also brought home to Western visitors the reality of unfamiliar problems with far more impact than would have occurred in a London or New York convention centre.

The African women who took a prominent and influential role were highly educated and articulate, aware of their goals and of the difficulties they face in reaching

them. There were also rural women from all over Kenya, many with little formal education, or fluency in English.

"What could they possibly get out of it?" one woman asked.

Lillian Kimani, a psychologist who counsels women and men whose lives have been disrupted by rapid cultural change, said she welcomed the opportunity for the rural women to attend.

"These women, too, will face major changes in their lives before long. It is good for them to see new things and to broaden their horizons."

Developing countries are sensitive that their facilities and organization may be considered less efficient than those of cit-

ies where coping with thousands of convention visitors is the norm.

Problems there were: NGO delegates were told to vacate hotel rooms booked and paid for in advance to make room for official UN delegations. But, this was resolved by women voluntarily sharing rooms.

The Kenyan government was criticized for prettying Nairobi streets by removing prostitutes, beggars (many blind or with crippling disabilities), and fruit vendors.

One speaker told a prostitution workshop that to avoid arrest some Nairobi prostitutes dressed up like West African delegates to the conferences, or as hospital nurses "coming off duty."

A petition seeking signatures against jailing prostitutes and clearing streets called Kenya "a highly oppressive society."

But, Kenya and Nairobi were proud of hosting the conference. Taxi drivers asked what you thought of their city as they hurtled through dense traffic at manic speeds.

(Meters are unknown, so fares varied on every trip. Sometimes, a driver unfamiliar with a route would ask "What do they usually charge you?")

Nairobi shopkeepers had a field day, and the daily newspapers ran long stories and good-humored cartoons.

The University of Nairobi campus green provided a central area for constant, informal, spontaneous interaction that was probably as valuable as organized workshops and likely would not have happened in the same way in a formal, indoor setting.

Opportunity to meet was not confined to women from different continents: one sign exhorted: "Network with other Asian Women." Another announced a meeting to "exchange ideas" among women's groups from more than 20 African countries.

On the whole, the conferences all went well, and the insights gained by having large numbers of women from The Third World, many of whom would have been unable to travel to Europe or North America, more than compensated for inconveniences.

Street dramas help teach rural Indians

Actors carry a message of drunken violence against women into the streets in the slums of Ahmedabad, 500 kilometres north of Bombay.

Ila Pathak, secretary of Ahmedabad



Women's Action Group (AWAG), told *The Journal* that specially-written street dramas have proved an effective tool in community education.

AWAG began with a group of educated, middle-class women, many of them teachers and university professors, who became incensed at the portrayal of women in Indian textbooks and media.

All, she said, denigrated the dignity of women, or portrayed them as sex objects. Even *suttee*, the custom of burning a widow on her husband's pyre, was glorified in textbooks. Although forbidden today, *suttee* still occurs in India, perhaps once a year, Ms Pathak said.

The volunteers began working on a long-term basis with some 3,000 or more people in three slums in the city, where both women and men, even pregnant women, haul coal. The work is so heavy they cannot work for more than three days without rest, and many suffer from lung and stomach ailments.

Ms Pathak said it took many months of patient work, beginning with mothers and young children, to gain the trust of the community, but now AWAG runs a number of well-attended programs, including literacy classes, pre- and post-natal child

care, immunization, and nutrition clinics.

Alcoholism is a major problem in such depressed areas and leads to various forms of violence. Bride-burning, which was also the subject of a slide show by another Indian group at Forum 85, is increasing. Usually, this results from what the husband or his family consider insufficient dowry, and often the death is covered up as an accident or suicide.

Genuine suicides are all too common. Ms Pathak said Indian women, traditionally trained to submission, "are easily pushed to death."

AWAG strives to raise their self-awareness, showing them other solutions to their problems.

Photographs she showed of one street drama depicted a drunken husband beating his wife and trying to drag her to his creditor's house in payment for his debts. But, friends and neighbors ran up and surrounded her, protecting her.

Another showed the wife running to her neighbors who called in a social worker. Surrounding the actors were a large group of spectators, adults and children. Ms Pathak said the street dramas are well received, and seem to have made an impact in the community and among the women.



NEXT MONTH: More on the UN Decade for Women Conference and Forum 85



Photos by Joan Hollobon, except those on the bottom of N-1, top of N-2, and top of N-4.