

International Movement
A.T.D. FOURTH WORLD
37, avenue du Général Leclerc
5480 Pierrelaye (France)
tel. (Paris) 464.69.63

7.04
T 61
560

WOMEN OF THE FOURTH WORLD

Summary of a contribution of the
INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT A.T.D. FOURTH WORLD
to the World Conference of the United Nations
DECADE FOR WOMEN
Copenhagen, July 1980

Esperanza (20) with two children, one of them in foster care, lives with her mother, a brother (19) and another youngster (17) in a New York slum. Occasionally two more children of an equally badly housed sister also move into the tiny apartment. Esperanza has never had a home, a household of her own. The father of her second child lives with his parents in the same building. During a third pregnancy, his parents claimed the child was not his. Esperanza, in despair, has had recourse to abortion. "I'll never forgive them for having forced me to kill my baby", she says. Talking of the blows she has received from her young man, she adds: "I deserved them. I try to be the man in the house, to boss him around. My family wants me to bring charges against him. No way. I cannot bring charges against the father of my boy."

Esperanza's voice is the voice of millions of women of all countries, victims of hard-core poverty, chained to the very bottom of the social scale in a world apart: the Fourth World. Esperanza in New York, Jacqueline who lives with her scrap merchant husband in an old truck, near Paris, Mrs. Santiago, wife of an unemployed gipsy, Ina abandoned with her two children in a shed near the Amsterdam docks, these women and so many others, perhaps have they heard about the Women's Decade. But do they participate, do they derive any benefit from it? More than all others, they are concerned with problems of health, education, employment, professional income and general human development. Even as they are with their family's right to security and their right to raise their own children, if they so desire.

The 1975 Conference in Mexico City marked the beginnings of a more fully recognized and more effectively coordinated effort to improve women's conditions throughout the world. After five years, we are about to evaluate the results. Our first question, will it concern the possible changes obtained by the poorest, among women, by those most powerless in our common struggle?

The answer may well be totally negative. For we have not registered their increased presence in national and international public life. They do not seem to be associated with our new institutions for education, common reflection on the defense of women's right; we have not heard their plea mentioned in parliamentary debates. More important perhaps, have they really been taken into consideration by our own women's movements?

One might well think that the situation of Fourth World women has worsened rather than improved. To their unbearable burden has been added the new anxiety of seeing the meagre aids from public assistance and private charities dwindle, as the economic crisis spreads throughout the world. To them, the present world-wide inflation virtually means having to give up the struggle for certain basic goods for survival. Of course, the drop in purchasing power, in material and therefore in psychological security, does not stand alone. Similar decreases are to be noted in all the fields where governments find themselves obliged to cut public expenses. Not necessarily women in general, but always the most powerless among them are among the first to suffer from the political decisions, called forth by the overall weaknesses of the economic situation.

Employment

Even more than their less underprivileged sisters, women of the Fourth World need to work. More than others, they suffer from the conflict arising from the necessity of increasing their income, while having to shoulder their responsibilities of mother and housewife. An all the more poignant conflict, as they know in advance that, whatever they do, they will never obtain the increase in family resources which would protect their children from insecurity. At best, they find badly paid jobs. Their lack of qualifications, of health, of know-how, of self-esteem hinder them in their search for satisfactory employment. This situation has become even worse, as increasing unemployment has heightened the competitiveness amongst women. The more qualified now accept work they would have scorned in better days. They now take the place of women totally deprived of all professional capacities. These are more and more compelled to turn to occasional, seasonal, irregular jobs, to home industry and piece work, to employers who refrain from registering their workers with social security systems. At the bottom of the social scale exploitation thus expands instead of decreasing. Millions of women are moreover reduced to virtually make-shift earnings, looking after their neighbours' children, doing their washing, inventing a multitude of humble services liable to give rise to a meagre pay. Young girls are no better-off than adult women. Since early childhood, they have laboured at home, helping their prematurely ageing mother. At the age of 14, 16 or 17, they have their first baby. Their health already jeopardized, they have all the more difficulty in taking up a full-time job. Soon, they are accused of being lazy, urged to abandon their babies. For all that, no one offers them the vocational training required to be more successful in their professional life.

Health

We have mentioned just now, how the young girls' physical development and well-being are endangered almost since birth. Unfavourable housing conditions, inadequate nutrition, an unhealthy environment and a generally retarded development in early childhood are soon followed by far too heavy tasks within the home. As the girls grow up, new handicaps arise, such as the lack of information, feelings of shame about their appearance and their badly nursed bodies, frequent pregnancies (frowned upon by the medical and social services). The rate of premature births is excessive, compared to national averages. The medical professions admit that they are no longer trained to approach groups in hard-core poverty. They take overbearing attitudes and contradictory measures. "Our children don't belong to us, the mothers says, they belong to the doctor, to the hospital..." Very young women are induced to sterilization, while a mother of eight may well solicit such help in vain.

Education

Inequalities in the field of education are by now a widely discussed phenomenon. The extreme form of inequality which lies in the exclusion of the poorest among women from all educational benefits is a somewhat less well-known evil. Little girls, born down by their parents' anxieties, are the main losers, even at the very beginning

of their school career. By the time they are 14 or 16 years old, no vocational training is adequately geared to their low level of education (many of them remaining illiterate, even in the highly industrialised countries). Besides, by that time schools and training centers refuse to register them. Especially when their family situation is unclear, as is often the case in a poverty-stricken milieu. "I was an unwed mother, the school refused to take me ; they said : we don't take prostitutes..". In any case, these young women know they are too badly dressed, too ignorant, too badly mannered : they cannot present themselves without fear and shame at our vocational training institutes. Their access to the labour market is imperiled as was the case of their mothers' when they set out to find work. Many of them will remain marginal workers, earning marginal salaries all their life.

The Family

Are there countries in which the family is unconditionally recognized as such in its own right? They seem rare and hard to find. Let us give only one example to illustrate the fact that, in most cases, certain conditions remain to be filled, if a mother with children wants to assert her family rights. Louissette is pregnant of her third child, when her companion is incarcerated. Some time later, she takes another young man into her home. He is out of work and receives no social security allowances nor public assistance. Is he a lodger or a new companion to Louissette? Public authorities do not even enquire ; they take for granted that Louissette has taken a new husband. She loses all her rights to financial support. She will only see them acknowledged again, after several months of total misery, when this young man also goes to prison. In the meantime, she has lived under the continuous threat that her children may be put in foster care or that she may be deprived of her parental authority.

Let us not be deluded. If Fourth World women demand that the survival of the family may no longer depend on the professional situation of the parents (often only of the father...), this is not because they want to live without a husband or to dodge employment. They simply request the basic material family security which may enable them to chose freely, be it a husband or be it a job.

A CALL UPON ALL WOMEN

The foregoing are but a few traits of the overall living conditions of women at the very bottom of the social scale. The international Movement A.T.D. FOURTH WORLD in which they have begun to organise and express themselves internationally, has developed a series of concrete proposals liable to help improve their lot. These have been presented in a study submitted to the U.N. mid-decade Conference. But most important, Copenhagen offers the opportunity to call for wide support among women, both for a general appeal and a resolution.

A general appeal to all women, to all women's organisations, to include the plea of women in hard-core poverty in their reflexions and action programmes, in their very existence and daily concerns. An appeal that women may collectively refuse an unjust and exclusive society, organised without the cooperation of the poorest among the poor. That they may acknowledge themselves and help increase general understanding for the fact that equal opportunities imply that the greatest efforts be devoted to those who have been most oppressed. That women in extreme poverty may be represented at all levels of national and international decision-making.

A Resolution that women will no longer accept policies nor programmes that would not provide explicitly for the participation of women of the Fourth World. That they will demand that all policies and programmes henceforth be examined and evaluated publicly, especially with regard to the real benefits obtained by women in poverty.

International Movement
A.T.D. Fourth World
107, avenue du Général Leclerc
95480 Pierrelaye - France
Tel.(Paris) 464.69.63

PRIORITY TO WOMEN IN HARD-CORE POVERTY

Draft Recommendation presented by the

INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT A.T.D. FOURTH WORLD

Thanks to the determination and persistent efforts of women's organizations throughout the world, the first half of the Women's Decade has brought about a number of improvements regarding their general conditions and opportunities. General resolutions adopted in Mexico City in 1975 have found at least some preliminary applications in various parts of the world. Though these applications remain insufficient, it seems nevertheless that an irreversible movement toward equality has been set into motion which will overcome the still remaining obstacles in the long run.

One of the 1975 resolutions, however, seems to have remained totally unheeded during these first five years of the Decade. No policy, no programme, either national or international, seems to have been developed for its application. It is Resolution n° 32 concerning the priorities to be assigned to the rights and interests of women who with their families live in conditions of unbearable poverty. The lot of the poorest among little girls, adolescents and grown women has not even remained what it was; it has become even more cruel than before.

Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that throughout the world, women among landless rural populations, among the very poor urban families literally piled up in make-shift shelters, shanty-towns, "favellas", "ciudades perdidas", "jhopad patti" in our cities have seen their conditions worsen. The same can be said for the women among nomad populations and so-called travelling people, for those belonging to the poorest among ethnic minorities. Agrarian reform, modernization of agricultural techniques industrialization and urbanization have left them aside. They are the first to suffer from unemployment and world-wide inflation.

The International Movement A.T.D. FOURTH WORLD therefore demands renewal of the pledge contained in Resolution n° 32 on behalf of women weighed down by an overwhelming poverty which annihilates all their basic human rights. The Movement submits the following draft recommendation to this end.

RECOMMENDATION

Concerning women living in conditions of extreme poverty

The Forum,

Considering

that extreme poverty implies the absolute impossibility to enjoy one's basic human rights,

Considering

that in many regions throughout the world, the conditions of poverty have worsened during the first half of the Women's Decade, denying to women all means of personal and collective development,

Recognizing

that humanity thus remains deprived of the participation in development, on the part of millions of women liable to offer a unique and essential contribution,

Recognizing

that all national and international governmental and non governmental authorities as well as public opinion must be continuously informed on the participation of women in poverty and on the exclusions of which they still remain the first victims,

1. Addresses an urgent appeal to all women and all men, to concentrate their efforts primarily on the rights of women who, with their families, continue to live in conditions of unbearable poverty;
2. Calls upon women to multiply their actions to sustain the most underprivileged among them in their efforts to put forward their aspirations and interests, to indicate their rights to representation and participation in public life, in development and in the reinforcement of peace in the world;
3. Recommends that all member States of the United Nations submit a detailed three-yearly report on their main policies and programmes regarding women, on the results obtained and particularly on the progress achieved by the most underprivileged among women.