

N° 0000001456

"PROGRAMA UNIVERSITARIO DE
ESTUDIOS DE GENERO" - U. N. A. M.

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Report of a meeting on
WOMEN AND POWER
organized by the
Ad Hoc Group for Equal Rights for Women
at the Vienna International Centre (VIC)
and held at the VIC on
International Women's Day
8 March 1983

The opening address was by Letitia Shahani
Assistant Secretary-General
Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs
United Nations

The meeting was also addressed by Enid Steward-Goffman
former President
Federation of International Civil Servants Associations (FICSA)

Panellists

Grace Akello
Ernest Borneman
Marisa Condé

Claudia Honneger
Friede Meissner-Blau
Rev. Molly Radley

Poet and writer
Writer, professor of philosophy
Journalist, at present working
for Radio France International
Feminist writer
Journalist
Ordained minister of the
Episcopal Church

Rapporteur

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INTRODUCTION

To celebrate International Women's Day - March 8th - the Ad Hoc Group for Women at the VIC organized an all-day meeting, whose subject was women and power.

After brief introductory remarks by Una Ellis, President of the Ad Hoc Group for Woman at the VIC, the morning was devoted to speeches on the subject of Women and Power by Ms. Shahani, Ms. Steward-Goffman and the six panellists. In the afternoon, the panellists responded to questions from the floor.

In her opening speech, Ms. Shahani, although admitting that she had been struck by the choice of power as a subject - usually it was more diplomatically termed equal educational opportunities, equal employment opportunities, access by women to decision-making, and so on - stated that power was something that women would have to understand and acquire in order to achieve their aims. Her statement showed that she understood not only power and politics, but also the women who refused to face the issue by denying that power was what they wanted or needed. She said she hoped the meeting would question traditionally held notions, for example, that women were more peaceful than men, and would confront women with questions that they unconsciously resisted asking.

The headings in the report reflect the questions that might be considered pertinent and the relevant portions of the speeches and discussions have been summarized under those headings.

As both Ms. Ellis and Ms. Steward-Goffman spoke on the position of women in the United Nations in the opening statements, and as a good deal of interest was expressed in that topic during the discussions, it has been dealt with separately at the end of the report.

WHAT IS POWER?

There were many views as to what power was, almost all of them negative. The many forms of power were discussed: powerlessness - the obverse of power; responsibility; patriarchy; aggression; the public (economic, political and social) and private (familial) spheres; and religion. Whether power should be individual or collective, exercised for oneself or for others was also discussed.

Ms. Meissner-Blau pointed out that power could be expressed in many ways - from subtle and persuasive to brutal and openly oppressive - but it always aimed at inducing the weaker to comply with the wishes of the stronger. She claimed that the Siamese twin of power was violence, a violence that was necessary to maintain power. And that the benefits of power were privileges.

Ms. Honneger quoted Max Weber's definition: Power means the opportunity - no matter on what basis - of enforcing one's own will in the context of a social relationship, even against resistance. (Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung, den eigenen Willen, auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht.)

Another view was that power was control over other people.

Only one participant pointed out that power could be a moral force, and used positively.

Whatever the definition, Ms. Shahani considered it useful that women should come to grips with the question of power, because without their understanding of what it was and what it entailed, it would be a continuing aspect of their marginalization.

DO WOMEN HAVE POWER?

Mr. Borneman spoke of the power structures in prehistory and of matrilineal and patrilineal societies. In the Middle Neolithic Age there had been a swing from matrilineal to patrilineal kinship and an increasing awareness of private property. The Upper Neolithic Age had seen the beginnings of patrilineal descent and inheritance, which laid the base for patriarchy, and the end of sexual equality: then came the first towns, "politics", and family structures with male dominance and enforced monogamy for women. For several thousands of years, women had not had power.

A distinction was made between power in the public (economic, political and social) sphere and the private (familial) sphere. Some participants felt that, traditionally, women did have power in the private or family sphere; others considered that women were virtually powerless.

Powerlessness - the obverse to power - was the theme of Ms. Akello, who spoke of her own country, Uganda, and several other African countries in which she had lived.

Ms. Akello stated that although the economic contribution of third world women was the base on which the male power structure was built, those women were ignored or abused by the men who, because they were part of the power structure, did so with impunity. Women were vital to the African economy, but were not recognized as a major economic force. Although women constituted the basic agricultural labour force (90 per cent in Uganda), men owned and controlled the land in most African societies, which meant they controlled the means of production.

Colonialism, she said, had entrenched the male-based power structure in Uganda. Only tax payers could consult with the Colonial Government. To be a tax payer, a person had to own land on which to build a hut. Since women could not own land they could not consult with the Government. From then till the present, consultations continued to be with the man who owned the land on which to build the hut. And that process continued even in international circles. Aid agencies went to developing countries and talked to the male planners, male householders, and so on.

Ms. Akello quoted two examples to demonstrate the powerlessness of women in Africa, both of which equated power with physical and psychological violence against women: physical abuse and female circumcision.

First, she said that a wife must be unquestioningly obedient to her husband, an obligation that was central to the male-female relationships in her society. Even educated women, and she was speaking from experience, had to comply with the wishes of their fathers and husbands, and were often beaten if they did not. A woman had to bring up her daughter with the full knowledge that, whatever else she might aspire to, she was basically born to get and remain married. If the wives left home for any reason, they and their family were ostracized and they lost all claims to their children.

Secondly, she said that circumcision and infibulation of girl children were continued at the wish of the men although not justified by religious or health reasons. Although it was traditionally carried out by the females, with the knowledge and apparent compliance of the women in the child's family, those women had no authority to stop the practice. However, she recognized that some of her African sisters insisted that circumcision and infibulation were normal and acceptable.

Ms. Akello did not believe that African women had power. If a woman appeared to be powerful, she must have fulfilled all the requirements of the male power structure in order to have been given a slice of power over other women. Such women had bought themselves temporary male status. For women to be involved more fully in the political and economic spheres, male attitudes towards women had to be reoriented.

During the discussions, the point was made that physical and psychological abuse of women, particularly wife beating, was a universal problem. Ms. Akello fully agreed. She had spoken only of Africa because that was the region she came from; she expected other women to speak of the situation in their country or region.

Some participants felt that, traditionally, women exercised power in the private or familial sphere. Marise Condé said that it would be wrong to declare that women in the Caribbean had been totally excluded from power within their various societies. Power had a broad meaning and covered different fields. Women had power in the education and upbringing of their children, in trade, distribution of goods, and so on. In her region, the Caribbean, the women traditionally held a great deal of religious authority. It was only in the field of politics, she said, that women had been the subject of widespread prejudice. Women did not participate in the power game, but instead gave their support to the men. She equated power with responsibilities, which responsibilities were particularly burdensome as they were not shared by the men.

That view was challenged by a participant who said that having a lot of tasks to perform did not necessarily mean that women had power or that they could influence events outside the private sphere. Having to carry too much responsibility with no help from the men was another aspect of powerlessness.

Another participant agreed, saying that Ms. Condé had separated political power from personal, social and familial power. The latter was a heavy responsibility, but did not lead to power in the public sphere.

Ms. Condé said they did have women in political positions, but they were not changing anything with their power.

Ms. Honneger spoke of the sexual segregation of women and men into the public and private spheres, and agreed with Ms. Condé that in some societies women exercised a lot of power in the private sphere. She cited studies carried out by an American ethnologist, Susan Carol Rogers, showing that in peasant societies women wielded considerable power within the household and community. However, men had greater access to judicial and other forms of public power.

DO WOMEN WANT POWER?

Power, as women encountered it, said Ms. Akello, was a sinister force. A large majority of the participants seemed to agree with her, and felt emphatically that they did not want power. It seemed they were afraid even to discuss it. The exceptions were the people who had it, had been near enough at least to witness it, or were men.

Ms. Shahani equated power with politics, saying that she supposed women in power also meant women and their participation in political life. She said that most women thought politics were dirty, and agreed that they might be, but they were also a necessary aspect of life. It was an issue in which women had to be educated.

Ms. Meissner-Blau agreed, and said that women's behaviour and actions in life from birth onwards were directed by power, by people who were more powerful than themselves. And the power lay with those who considered themselves somewhat more than equal. Women were constantly being told that the nature of the female was weaker, more limited, passive, frail, affectionate, emotional and, most important, male adaptive. Being male was to be autonomous, strong, rational, ambitious and goal-directed. That, she said, was primitive socio-biology, claiming a genetic male dominance to deadlock sex roles forever.

She stated that the image of women as creatures who found their only real fulfilment in giving birth and raising children, as nurturers, protectors and carers while men conquered the world, was a deeply conservative one that had been used as a pretext for relegating women to the private sphere, away from public concerns. That must cease. Women must participate in decision-making at all levels of the public sphere, which did not mean they should renounce so-called feminine values - rather, men must acquire them. Women were not more peace-loving or less aggressive than men, but differed in their attitudes to war - because they had always been its victims - and to property as well as to power.

Women, the less equal, continued Ms. Meissner-Blau, by their acquiescence had strengthened male dominance for the last few thousand years. Currently, they were being called upon to decide whether the road to equality and women's rights led towards an acceptance of male standards, or whether they would discover a feminine or feminist view of the world, where survival had priority over competition, and respect for others exceeded the urge for domination and power.

Ms. Radley said that the Judaeo-Christian tradition (the only one she was qualified, she said, to speak about) centred around a male God. The power structures formed out of that socio-religious tradition continued to shape and form women's lives even in the current atheistic age. If God were male, then all power must be held by the male of the species. Women must decide what they wanted: to gain entrance to the existing power structures or try to create new ones. She asked whether women wanted power structures at all? They should affirm what they were, not deny it. Women could change the world, not as men, but rather as whole persons.

One participant questioned the extraordinary preoccupation with power, and with the word "power". She hated the word and found something menacing about it. In its stead, she suggested the word "equality" - equal advantages and equal opportunities that women should have, but were not going to get without respect and recognition of their qualities and qualifications. She failed to specify how women were going to gain the respect and recognition that would lead to equality.

She brought into the discussion Lord Acton's definition that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We had seen plenty of that, she said.^{1/}

Another participant said that power was not the word she wanted to see. Women were not in power. They did not seek power; that was a word she did not like at all. What women wanted was freedom, independence and equality. What they mainly needed was freedom of thought and speech.

Mr. Borneman pointedly asked how they proposed to attain their aims. It was left to a male participant to make the connection between wanting something and obtaining it: there was no way, he said, to achieve equality, freedom and independence without first obtaining power. Any idea that women could change society without obtaining power was an illusion. If that was what women believed, they might as well go home and watch television. Some participants obviously agreed with him.

Another participant summed up by saying that women were afraid of power; not only of men wielding power but also of they, themselves, taking power.

HOW CAN WOMEN GET POWER?

Women, said Ms. Shahani, needed to be educated in the process of obtaining power, and that could not be done by getting a doctorate in politics. You had to run for office, or help some one to run for office, to see how power was obtained. Certainly, the obtaining of power was closely related to the extent to which women could enjoy equality, the extent to which they could contribute to development and peace.

^{1/} No one recalled Adlai Stevenson's definition, more to the point as far as women are concerned, that power corrupts, and lack of power corrupts absolutely. LP.

She asked whether power grew out of the barrel of a gun, which was the classic definition of power.

Mr. Borneman strongly felt it did. He said that unless women combined what they said with action, men, who were used to considering action as the only yardstick, would disregard them.

Mere refusal, he advised, was a measure of power that could be respected. The working classes had used it for close to a century - they went on strike. Similar measures were possible in everyday political life. A feminist movement, or any other movement, that had the power to execute what it threatened would be taken seriously. But anyone pulling a lion's tail and not having a gun would be eaten by the lion. Being a political animal, a politically active one he would not go into the lion's cage without his gun - and his gun was his political party, and its power. Trade unions had the power to strike. Under certain circumstances, if the worst came to the worst, he would not hesitate, even in the United Nations, to advise militant armed resistance. He saw no reason why anyone should pretend that was not possible. He did not see why women could not carry guns. And if power could only be reached by those means, he saw no reason why women should not use them.

He asked how women proposed to obtain their aims. The aims were seditious and the means to obtain them were seditious. The fact that they could meet without being arrested showed how harmless they were. Until women were prepared to go out on the streets at the risk of being put in concentration camps, men would not have to worry.

There were protests from the floor that women carrying guns would solve nothing.

One participant pointed out that India had won independence not with guns, but by the exercise of moral power. She invoked the example of Ghandi, and said that attitudes could be changed. She suggested that that was the road the women's movement should take, instead of equipping itself with arms.

Mr. Borneman agreed that he did not wish to see a world that rested on guns, but he saw no way of altering a given society except by using the means of power. Women and men should fight together using the instruments of power that characterized that society. Patriarchy should be fought by patriarchal means. Only to the extent that a given argument was backed by power would men surrender. They would not surrender to argument or to reason, but to power and only to power.

He repeated that patriarchy was based on private property, and added that he did not believe either sex could be properly emancipated until private property was abolished.

Ms. Meissner-Blau said women should not shy from conflicts, but should learn to resolve them without violence.

An interjection from the floor was that it was a class war, it was a technological war, it was a bloody war. It was claimed that women were not interested in power or guns. They had to look at what was rich and poor before they decided about power and powerlessness.

Ms. Honneger answered that power and powerlessness did not go simply with class - unless it could be claimed that women were a class. There were always the rich and the poor, and always the problem between men and women.

Words were a weapon, she said, and one that men had used very well. They had talked women into many of the things they believed. Women should try and use the same weapon.

She felt that the way to gain power was to take counter-measures against the male power structure. One was being used already. The male monopoly in defining human behaviour through theology, law, medicine, the sciences and the arts was being challenged by female achievements. Women must analyse the power structure and set their own strategies against it. In order not to be overwhelmed and afraid of the present social systems, in order not to regress into powerlessness, they needed concrete forms of female solidarity.

The early feminist movements, after the turn of the century, had been much more aware of the need for power. They planned strategies to gain social influence, informal and formal power, inspired by universal sisterhood. Their power resources were not only based on an ascribed form of moral superiority, but also on female networks built on kinship, friendship and home and social activity in a sexually segregated world. That gave women the strength to enlarge their field of action.

Though women had gained in formal rights they had lost the informal channels of power strategies through female pressure groups. They needed the solidarity and female networks that their grandmothers had had, especially with women of developing countries.

The central problem, she said, was to change not only women's attitudes, but also those of men. Many participants spoke of the crucial importance of changing attitudes, but how they were to be changed was not specified except for vague references to education.

Ms. Steward-Goffman said that paternalistic attitudes in the United Nations remained remarkably entrenched. After years of talking about attitudinal change, there were still men in the VIC who believed their secretaries should make them coffee. Attitudinal change was required on both sides: from the power-holders, the males, and the would-be power-sharers, the females.

Ms. Meissner-Blau considered the issue of coffee-making very important because of the attitudes involved. Instead of theories, women should try action. It was important for them to try and change their lives, to become conscious of what was happening to them every day, and to discuss matters.

Ms. Honneger suggested that a week without making coffee would be a strategy that women in the United Nations could try.

Mr. Borneman believed that the study of the historical process of change offered a key to effecting social change in the present. Citing Vere Gordon Childe, he said that the strategies and tactics by which males gained power over females and children during the "Neolithic revolution" might offer a measure of insight into the strategies and tactics by which women could free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy.

HOW SHOULD WOMEN EXERCISE POWER?

Ms. Shahani said there were two sides to the theme of women and power: one was how to get power, and the other, once women had got it, was how to exercise it.

She said there were several reactions to the second question. Some people said that once women were in positions of power, they would be more humane than men because they knew the value of life and were mothers - the bearers and nourishers of life. That they would be humane, Ms. Shahani pointed out, remained to be proved. There were not yet enough women in positions of power to show whether they would be less brutal or less ruthless than some men. She quoted studies carried out by the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Branch of the United Nations that showed that the most adept and the most successful terrorists were women; not women who came from deprived backgrounds, but women who were well educated, from the middle and upper classes. There was evidence that women could be just as aggressive as men, and just as capable of performing criminal acts.

How power should be exercised was discussed at length. Opinion was split on whether women would exercise it in the same manner as men, or with more humanity. There seemed to be two sides to the exercise of power: for oneself or over others. Women seemed able to accept more easily the first concept, although they labelled it as gaining equality, freedom and respect. They shied away from power over others.

Ms. Meissner-Blau considered that women were not more peace-loving or less aggressive than men. They were human beings with the same potential for anger, hatred, fear or spite, but they had a different approach to war and property.

Ms. Meissner-Blau made the point that no law of nature claimed that men had to be heartless or women brainless. Neither intelligence nor emotion was gender-bound. She said that in almost all cultures girls were reared with the emphasis on their emotions and imaginations, but boys were trained to exercise their mathematical-logical-assertive faculties.

Ms. Steward-Goffman hoped that women, if and when they did obtain power, should not be afraid to be women; by that she meant not afraid to show emotions that might be labelled as hysteria, and not afraid to show compassion, humility and understanding to those they administered.

She said that it might be a truism that power entailed responsibility, but all too often it was a sentiment that was not felt with the heart. She would like to be optimistic: once in power in significant numbers, women would indeed herald a new era of dignity in human relationships and would not imitate the worst characteristics of those who had held them in oppression for so long.

Ms. Akello said that only when women were fully involved in the political and economic spheres would they be aware of their own power and be able to decide on their contribution to development.

Ms. Condé felt that it was not unrealistic to expect from women a sane attitude towards power. They had a larger sense of the community. It was not a search for personal profit or achievement. It was a way of working together towards the same goal. Traditional political parties did

not allow for a sense of togetherness. Everybody did a solo act and hoped to be noticed. At root, there was competition. A larger number of women in those bodies could entirely modify them - transform a collection of individuals into one harmonious body.

She said that women were used to working for a collective exercise of power. As they had had to play a game with men to gain a certain measure of freedom, so they had moderated their own authority. Ms. Condé believed that that did not mean that women could not be leaders or dictators. History proved they could. It simply meant that if women kept their current approach to life, they could bring about an altogether different attitude and pattern of relationship.

Ms. Condé quoted an example of successful power-sharing in a rural community in Guadeloupe that created a power system in which both men and women formed a council to deal with all problems.

Mr. Borneman and another participant pointed out that change towards equality would be slow. History had taught that no one liked to relinquish privileges and power.

There seemed to be a fear that women who were successful and became powerful, would become like men.

Ms. Meissner-Blau said that women who acceded to high-level posts, no matter what kind of post, were often male-adaptive women. They were not the type who would promote other women. That was logical, because high posts were chosen by men and if they chose a woman she had to be one whom they liked. Token women who were better men than men were not wanted.

Ms. Honneger thought that it did not make much sense to point with horror to women who had become "men" in order to become successful in official power systems.

Mr. Borneman considered that patriarchy was an aspect of a social, not a biological system. In which case, women in power would behave the same way as men in power. It seemed to him most important to say that in a patriarchy all the characteristics that were ascribed to women and were claimed to be female qualities had nothing to do with the biology of women. Those roles could in certain societies, over certain periods, be reversed. The work done by Margaret Mead, although she had come under heavy criticism for it recently, had shown that. The defeatism that female biology had something to do with the current oppression of women was totally unacceptable.

If power were misused, said one participant from the floor, it did not matter in whose hands it lay, whether a woman's or a man's, whether a majority or minority group.

Another participant was surprised and disappointed that people were wondering about the abuses of power. The most important thing was first of all to gain power, then discuss what to do with it. It was futile to worry about abuses of power when women did not have any. It was going backwards. There was no way to achieve the aims of the movement if women did not achieve power. Any idea that society would be changed without obtaining power was an illusion.

Ms. Meissner-Blau said that if women behaved like slaves, they would be treated like slaves. It was a question of attitudes. Sometimes it was easier to be the victim than to struggle or to confront one's own desires to change the situation and consider what needed to be done. The happy slave was the worst enemy of liberation.

Ms. Shahani wondered whether women, if they obtained power, would be able to exercise it with more humanity, prudence and love than men did. Perhaps, she mused, one could say that power without love and wisdom was no power at all.

But, said Ms. Meissner-Blau, love was only possible between equals.

The prevailing view seemed to be that women would handle power differently than men; they would be more co-operative, more positive.

DO WOMEN HAVE POWER IN THE UNITED NATIONS?

Ms. Shahani said that of the three United Nations centres, Vienna was perhaps the most conservative when it came to women's issues. As the central machinery for women's issues had been moved to Vienna, she hoped that women staff members would become more interested in those issues, and that women could contribute more fully to the decision-making process.

Ms. Steward-Goffman stated that during her presidency of a large international federation of staff unions of the United Nations system, she had discovered that women's issues were dealt with in a cavalier fashion in the almost-exclusively male corridors of power. If she had ever been under the illusion that the United Nations system saw the need to be a model employer or pace-setter in the employment and treatment of women, that illusion had been resoundingly shattered. It had been a real uphill struggle to achieve such mild innovations as part-time work and flexible working hours; modest gains, for example maternity leave provisions, still fell short of the arrangements prevailing in many developed countries.

She accused the United Nations system of paying a good deal of lip-service to improving the status of its women employees, but of achieving very little. It was uncertain whether the absence of interest or commitment to women's problems was due to the conspicuous lack of women at senior policy-making levels, but it was certain that progress was very slow.

She cited the recent report (A/37/469) of the Joint Inspection Unit, which she described as an all-male panel of roving investigators, giving statistics on the status of women in the international civil service. Her favourite one, she said, showed that the percentage of women at the D-1 level in the whole United Nations system had increased from 1.3 per cent to 1.4 per cent of all employees at that level in the last five years. Progress indeed, she remarked caustically. United Nations agencies, with staffs of several thousands, were proud to report a 100-per-cent increase in the employment of professional women during the same period: it sounded impressive until it was realized that that meant a total of 6 instead of 3, or 12 instead of 6. Those few examples, and many more could have been cited, showed that, while women might have come a long way, they still had a long way to go.

It was often argued, and was doubtless true, she said, that women were not the only people interested in women's rights; none the less, paternalistic attitudes remained remarkably entrenched and an attitudinal change was required on both sides: women and men.

One participant stated that there would be no discussion of the power structure in the United Nations because women were the objects of that power and could not afford to discuss it.

Another stated that power operated by being accepted. If women got together and acted, it was possible they could change certain things. She thought that they should investigate the potential for action in the VIC - positive or negative - and see what really happened - whether the power structure was as monolithic as it was thought to be, or whether, by pulling just one small thread, they would make the whole thing disintegrate. If all the women who had wanted to come to the meeting had just walked out of their offices, what would have happened? In the presence of solidarity, nothing.

Ms. Radley agreed that something should be done right there in the VIC. It was fear of the imaginary things that would happen if women said "no coffee today" that immobilized them, and so the whole thing continued. If one small part were mobilized, perhaps the big part would follow.

Ms. Ellis closed the meeting by reminding the participants of what had been achieved by the Ad Hoc Group for Women in New York. For instance, the Ad hoc Group's negotiations with some representatives of the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly had eventually resulted in adoption of resolution 33/143, in which the General Assembly set a target of a 25 per cent increase in women professionals in the United Nations system by 1982. Although that goal had not been achieved - by the end of 1981 of the total number of professional staff (9,372), 80.4 per cent were men and 19.6 per cent were women (see A/37/469) - still, some progress had been made and a goal set for people to work towards.

The Ad Hoc Group for Women at the VIC had been established, two years ago, to work towards the achievement of equality between women and men at the VIC. As had been pointed out several times during the meeting, one of the immediate priorities was to change attitudes of women as well as of men. Women had to be aware of the attitudes they held in order to change them. Too often they unconsciously accepted the attitudes of men towards women. That had been demonstrated at the meeting. Women had not faced the issue: they said they wanted equality - but not power. Women needed to get together to discuss the issues that concerned them, and generally, as had been stated during the meeting, raise their individual consciousness.

The Ad Hoc Group of Women at the VIC welcomed all persons interested in the goal of equality between women and men in the United Nations system, but until women themselves accepted the responsibility for changing their own lives, no progress could be made.