

"Global Solidarity for Women's Health"

A Report on the 6th International Women and Health Meeting

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The author of this article attended the 6th International Women and Health Conference in the Philippines in November 1990. Her report focuses on issues that were raised at the conference relating to violence against women - including militarisation, sexual violence, and female circumcision - and those relating to sexuality and infertility.

International meetings of the women's health movement have been held every 3 years since the first meeting in Rome in 1977. During the past 13 years the nature of the meetings have changed, from a small number of participants based mainly in Western Europe to a large meeting, with participants from all over the world. The focus has also changed; from being centred around reproductive rights to now encompassing a large number of issues that affect all aspects of women's social, mental and physical well-being.

The impact of the global economic crisis, reproductive rights, militarisation, sexuality, violence against women, religion, transnational corporations, popular education and feminist ethics were all part of the programme of the 6th International Women and Health meeting in the Philippines in November 1990.

The 6 day conference was attended by 300 women from over 80 countries and 100 Philippine women. Most of these women represented grassroots women's health organisations. Many representatives were angry that funding organisations and government linked groups such as the United States Population Council were allowed to attend. They said that much of their work brought them into direct confrontation with the policies that these groups championed.

Representatives from the Latin American and Caribbean, South-East Asian, and the African regional women's health networks, were also amongst those who attended. African women held their first network meeting in October 1989, with the second



International Women's Day, Hullybrow, 8 March 1991 - solidarity against violence against women.

meeting being planned for later this year in Zambia (see end of article for details).

Two of the main themes of the conference are focussed on in this article:

(a) Violence against Women - including militarism and violence against women, sexual violence, and traditional cultural practices.

(b) Sexuality and infertility

Violence against women

Most of the women at the conference from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific, had at some time lived under repressive governments or lived in areas close to United States military bases. This gave women common reference points in talking about the effects of violence and militarisation on women.

During the discussion, women from Eritria, Palestine, Bangladesh, Chile and Malaysia described horrifyingly similar experiences of military rape, sexual abuse of minority women, air bombardment, and detention by military or repressive regimes.

"The disappeared"

In her paper, Maria del Rosario Cuevas of the "Comision de Derechos Humanos Central America" spoke about "the disappeared". "The disappeared" refers to people who have been detained or abducted, usually by members of the local "security" forces, and are never seen, or heard of, again. It is believed that they are usually executed and buried in mass graves. In Latin and Central America about 150 000 people have been detained and disappeared in the last three decades. Women feel the effects of these human rights abuses, both as victims (30% of the total) and as widows and mothers, left to cope with the deep emotional and psychological scars.

Military bases

Another area of concern was the effects of the presence of military bases on women. These problems were reflected all over South East Asia where members of the US military forces were present.

In the Philippines, where the U.S. is supporting the Aquino regime's counter insurgency programme, there is the problem of increased militarisation. One of the delegates talked about the consequences of the presence of US bases in the Philippines. She said that in effect the bases encourage prostitution and the economic dependence of women on the bases. Officially there are 749 "amusement places" in the immediate vicinity of the bases. Registered "hospitality girls" number around 300 000 while child prostitutes (7 - 15 years) number around 20 000.

Delegates discussed the role of US servicemen in the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. A women from Thailand explained the situation in her country where every two months US navy boats stop. She said "4 000 to 10 000 US navy men disembark for 'rest and recreation'. Sex workers come from all over the country. One of the consequences of this is that 50% of sex workers are HIV positive". But the US government refuses to take any responsibility for the health care of the women.

There is also the problem of unwanted pregnancy. Women have to resort to back-street abortions or are left to care for 'souvenir' babies as the Amerasian children are called.

Personal violence against women

Betty Yeom from the "All Women's Action Society" explained how women's organisations in Malaysia had formed a Joint Action Group to deal with sexual violence against women. In their work on sexual harassment at the workplace, rape and domestic violence in the home they have focussed on public education forums, meetings with public authorities, eg. police, health workers, and legal reforms. Over the last five years they

have had some success in getting laws amended, educating the public on sexual violence and getting the police to have a more sympathetic attitude to victims of sexual violence.

Women from Australia described how after pressure from women's organisations the government gave \$3 million for a central campaign on criminal assault and violence against women. The campaign involved TV and newspaper adverts, a national survey on attitudes towards violence, and educational projects - including community and professional education.

In Canadian hospitals nurses have an 'emergency' code which they call when they experience abuse. When the other nurses hear it, they all move to that area to give the nurse being abused solidarity support.

Female circumcision

Berahne Ras-work from the "Inter - African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women" spoke about the practice of female circumcision. She said: "genital mutilation is a living reality and a clear manifestation of social violence against women. Women are made to believe that their body, especially their reproductive parts are unholy and unclean. Millions of women submit to the mutilation of their body and their most sensitive parts in order to be clean, chaste and loyal to their husbands. In order to reduce their women's sexual desire, society found it necessary to reduce her physically".

Sexuality, Fertility and Solidarity

Women's oppression is experienced by them, in various ways which affect their sexuality. Examples are: the number of female AIDS victims, through limited notions on sexual preferences, acts of sexual violence committed against women, through their lack of control over their fertility, and in dehumanising traditional practices.

In most cultures womanhood and motherhood are seen as being synonymous. This may result in infertile women feeling alienated. Infertility in women are may be the result of scientific or military interventions eg. a consequence of the use of contraceptives like the Dalkon Shield or a result of the use of Agent Orange.

There are also different approaches to fertility and infertility with respect to First and Third World women. As Jocelyne Scutt said; "Where a white middle class woman is diagnosed 'infertile' the 'treatment' in the developed world is to 'make her pregnant' by whatever means possible. Third World women may be encouraged to attend sterilisation camps or may have other contraceptive measures forced on them. The infertility rates of women in Third World countries are high. Nonetheless both fertile and infertile Third World women are seen as candidates for population control".

What is needed though is women's solidarity on issues affecting their sexuality.

However, solidarity, as Rina Nissim who spoke on lesbianism pointed out, is often not forthcoming. Heterosexual women don't support lesbian women's issues; western women don't support African women in their campaigns; the examples are endless. The dominant women (western, white, middle class, heterosexual) need to recognise other women's needs and even though they might be contrary to their own, provide solidarity and support.

Conference resolutions

The last session of the conference was spent discussing resolutions that had come out of the different themes and sessions. Women from the United States who were attending the conference, presented resolutions condemning the presence of US bases in the Philippines. Other resolutions called for safe, effective contraception and sterilisation, comprehensive health services for women, full information about sexuality and reproduction and safe, legal abortion. There were also demands around access to clean water, low-cost food and housing, sanitation, daycare and cultural changes.

In conclusion here are the impressions of Clara Ejembi from Nigeria; "The conference is a real meeting of the minds. But though I may not agree with all that has been said (eg. in the sexuality session), it did, however, give an insight into other women's perceptions of issues. Meeting women from all over the world and from different organisations has also allowed for some networking. Salamat!"

References

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 2. Ras-work, Berhane "Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women", paper presented to the 6th International Women and Health Meeting, 3-9 November 1990, Manila, Philippines.
 3. Sancho, Nelia "Women, Foreign Intervention and Military Prostitution", paper delivered at the 6th International Women and Health Meeting, 3-9 November 1990, Manila, Philippines.
 4. Scutt, Jocelyne "Women, Sexuality and Infertility: Formulating a Feminist Approach to a 'Brave New World'", paper presented to the 6th International Women's and Health Meeting, 3-9 November 1990, Manila, Philippines.
 5. Yaom, Betty "All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Malaysia", paper presented to the 6th International Women's and Health Meeting, 3-9 November 1990, Manila, Philippines.
- The Second African Regional Meeting on Women and Health takes place in Zambia, 1991. Contact Christine Ngambi, NGO Coordinating Committee, P.O. Box 37879, Lusaka, Zambia.
 - The Seventh International Women and Health Meeting will be held in Uganda in 1993. Contact Josephine Kasolo, WGNRR - Uganda, P.O. Box 2395, Kampala, Uganda.

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