

U.S.: 'Moral Victory' At Women's Session

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Nairobi, Kenya — The final conference of the UN's Decade for Women officially opened yesterday, with a face-saving but nonbinding compromise the United States declared a "moral victory."

For months during conference preparation, the United States has been demanding that the 157 delegations at the official meeting agree to adopt at least the main conference document — consensus in United Nations parlance — and not by vote. This would demonstrate a global unanimity on issues of women's concern, emphasizing agreement instead of discord.

It also would keep the overwhelming Third World majority from voting down the United States on issues odious to U.S. policy — such as the statement equating Zionism with racism voted at the Mexico City conference in 1975 that opened the decade.

No agreement on consensus was reached. In its stead came a neat formula introduced at the last minute by UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, a statement to the conference saying the final document "should be" adopted by consensus. It is in no way binding upon the delegates, but was enough to persuade the United States to back off its demand and "define our own victory," as Maureen Reagan, head of the U.S. delegation, put it. "We consider it a moral victory because what we're talking about is a moral commitment to the idea of consensus," she told reporters later.

The compromise came after the official conference opening. Perez de Cuellar, Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi and Kenya's Margaret Kenyatta, who was elected conference president, all gave welcoming addresses to the 1,400 delegates.

The final document, a draft under discussion for four months, is called "Forward-Looking Strategies to the Year 2000." It is a compilation of more than 300 paragraphs on major women's issues and a few of the world's more intractable problems. More than 50 of the paragraphs are still at issue, including the most contentious ones on the apartheid and Palestinian questions.

Despite Reagan's claim of "moral victory" in a dispute that threatened to undo the conference before it began, the good news in Nairobi for American women was a week old and half a mile away from the official UN affair.

There, at "Forum '85," 11,000 of the world's women have been at work since last Tuesday having their own say about women's advancement. It is a freewheeling conclave, unrestrained by the diplomatic protocols and procedural hurdles that can drain the dynamism out of UN-run events, no matter how compelling the subject.

The procedural bustle at the Kenyatta Conference

Center had no visible impact on the carnival of consciousness well under way at "Forum '85" on the University of Nairobi Campus, alive with displays of every description, daily workshops by the hundreds and impromptu dialogues among women who otherwise would have little to do with one another.

In the multitudes are an estimated 3,000 American women, representing hundreds of organizations ranging from the American Association of University Women to a native American group called the Dakota Women of All Nations.

There is a "peace tent" run by Sissy Farenthold of Texas and an ad hoc group from 15 western countries who call themselves the Feminists International For Peace And Food. Their blue-and-white striped tent is a main attraction, and under it, they played host last week to a ripping Palestinian-Israeli dialogue.

"American women here are learning a lot," said Kathy Bonk of the National Organization for Women Legal Defense Fund. She cited how African and Asian nations with relatively new governments have equal rights for women built into their constitutions, putting them far ahead of the United States in terms of constitutional rights. French women, she said, got their government to put up a \$15 million legal defense fund for women, something her organization is doing privately.

A shift from the two previous global women's gatherings — in Mexico City and at the mid-decade review five years ago in Copenhagen — is shown by the kind of American woman who has shown up in Nairobi.

"Because the conference is in Africa, we have less of the upper-middle-class woman who likes to travel. The white women who are here do, in fact, recognize that they are in Africa and defer to the women of color," Bonk said.

One of the elements giving the informal conclave "a terrific pulse," as former Rep. Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.) put it, is the presence of about 1,000 black American women, proud to be in Africa.

About 200 black American women are here representing Links, a business and professional association whose delegation includes octogenarian Etta Moten Barnett, who played Bess in "Porgy and Bess" more than 40 years ago.

Black Women for Wages for Housework rallied for the International Prostitutes Collective, decrying the 80 recent prostitute killings in Seattle and declaring that women's poverty, not prostitution, was the real issue.

Jackie Pope, of New York, doesn't belong to any women's group but got her whole family to contribute to send her to Nairobi "on half a shoestring. I thought it was important to be here to see what progress there was in the decade. And also, to come to the motherland. It's been very inspiring."



Feminist Betty Friedan, right, holds one of her daily seminars at the University of Nairobi. Friedan came to Kenya for "Forum '85," a conclave dealing with women's issues.

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