

A Limited Consensus for Women

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Nairobi, Kenya — It was a fractured agreement, but a global consensus nonetheless. And that is the result history will record for the final international conference of the UN Decade for Women.

After two weeks of exhausting negotiations, whose outcome could reasonably have been predicted before they began, none of the 160 delegations could walk away euphoric at a breakthrough on any of contentious political issues.

But then none could say the gathering, against the short measuring stick it set for itself, was not a success.

For one thing, the United States, which pays a quarter of all UN bills, did not force a collapse by walking out as threatened.

And the final conference document — despite some strong objections, three venomous floor fights and three separate votes on paragraphs that could not be agreed on informally — was indeed adopted by general agreement, giving it some limited measure of strength in the scheme of UN instruments.

"Great theater, lousy feminism," one western European delegate said ruefully, watching the last-minute scurrying around the room in an effort to reach a compromise before the Kenyans would have had to face the embarrassment of a world conference in their capital city gone hopelessly off-track.

The diplomat was used to the scene. He has made a career of negotiating UN-style, unruffled by the the exasperating politics of voting by bloc or special interest sub-group or the "orgy of hypocrisy" as Maureen Reagan, head of the U.S. delegation, described the stuff of UN debate.

In the two-day final plenary session, only minutes were needed to approve the more than 350 paragraphs on issues of specific concern to women. Yet three paragraphs — on the Third-World debt crisis, apartheid and the Palestinians — dominated the discussions, as they had in the negotiating committees for nine days before.

The overwhelming majority of countries supported the language of the three paragraphs, and they are included in the final document with footnotes registering the objections from the West.

But the climax of the conference was the battle about whether a paragraph that included a refer-

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ence equating Zionism with racism should be left in the document. The United States let it be known it would walk out if the paragraph remained. Other Western nations made it clear they could not support a document containing such a reference, just as they had not supported the main documents of the two previous women's decade conferences, in Mexico City in 1975 and in Copenhagen in 1980. The lack of consensus on the final documents — both passed on a vote — blighted those conferences.

Moderate non-aligned nations begged for the conference to be saved. Kenya proposed a compromise whereby "racism and all forms of racial discrimination" was substituted for the word "Zionism." It took 5½ hours to negotiate the deal.

The Palestinians and their allies saved face by proclaiming the move a magnanimous gesture on the part of the Palestinian Liberation Organization to save the conference for the sake of their hosts, the Kenyans.

Yet despite the politics in Nairobi, much was achieved for women, both at the official conference and the unofficial "Forum '85" that preceded it. The global exchanges of information, the sense gained of where the world is moving on the question of women, the new cognizance of what is called the "feminization of poverty" and the problems attendant to having no power — all were confronted.

The nearly 400 paragraphs of the document itself, called "Forward-Looking Strategies to the Year 2000" are vaguely formulated so that no government has to commit to more than it would willingly do for the female part of its population.

It was for this reason, for example, that the United States insisted on entering a reservation on the paragraph calling for "comparable worth" legislation, or equal pay for work of equal value. Though states and cities have such provisions, the Reagan administration has not supported the concept at the federal level.

Yet even hard-core feminists saw the document as a radical statement of intent toward improving the lot of women, be they refugees, victims of war or

exploitation, farmers producing half the world's food, battered housewives, businesswomen seeking better pay and credit, or politicians seeking real power.

On the issue of power, even the Zionism debate at the conference plenary session was an indicator of how the position of women has begun, however slightly, to change.

The first time the Zionism-is-racism formula found its way into a UN document was at the Mexico City women's decade opening conference in 1975. It happened again that year in a UN General Assembly resolution, once more in 1979 in a Soviet resolution on hegemonism and finally in 1980 at the Copenhagen mid-decade women's conference.

"Copenhagen was used and I'm sure Mexico, too," said one source before the compromise was reached. "If Zionism doesn't get into this document, it is a way of saying that a women's conference is not going to be used anymore."

Maureen Reagan, head of the U.S. delegation, appeared subdued by the results of the past two weeks, though she stated U.S. objectives for the final document — that it be agreed to by consensus and without reference to Zionism — were met.

"There are almost 400 paragraphs in the document," she said. "And all but 10 of them are excellent formulations. But the fact is in the last three days, we never mentioned a women's issue. We're very concerned about that."

The final document calls for another UN women's conference between now and the year 2000.

Reagan mentioned that Alan Keyes, who has been serving for the past two years as U.S. ambassador to the UN's economic and social council, will be moving on to become assistant secretary of state for international organizations, which will give him responsibility over U.S. participation in the United Nations.

He would replace Gregory Newell, who led the charge to get the United States out of UNESCO last December 31.

Reagan said Keyes, who has carried out much of the political negotiating for the United States at the Nairobi conference, will be rethinking U.S. participation in such conferences.

"If we don't think we can have a meaningful conference," Reagan said, "why should we participate?"