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# Divisive End to 'Decade of Women'

By Brooke W. Kroeger

Newsday UN Bureau

United Nations — The UN Decade of Women, on the off-chance it escaped your attention, is just about over.

The finale comes July 15-26 in Nairobi, with a world conference at which upwards of 2,500 delegates will review what's been achieved in 10 years of trying to agree on strategies to advance the position of women by the year 2000.

Two clouds have already formed over the Nairobi conference. One is recognition that little has been achieved since the 1975 inauguration of the women's decade. The second is fear of a repeat of the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen. That 1980 meeting was politicized by well-organized Arab delegations and, most participants generally agree, became an embarrassment to its organizers and leaders.

The secretary-general for the Nairobi conference, Letitia Shehani, acknowledges that gains over the past 10 years have been modest.

Shehani cites a UN questionnaire completed by 120 governments which shows that women are living longer, that more are working than ever before, that their level of illiteracy has decreased, that they have greater access in fields such as science and technology, and that statisticians and planners are beginning to understand the importance to national economies of women in unpaid roles of housekeeping, small farming and the like.

Shehani considers it positive that many of the

Nairobi delegations will include men. But other United Nations sources close to the conference planning say it points up another reason for the modest achievements of the decade:

"When the meetings become political," one said, "that's when the men come out of the woodwork."

"It's always the government line. I don't know why women think it's going to be any different when the issue is women."

Take, for example, the issue of battered wives. It rated only passing reference at Copenhagen in 1980. The Soviet Ukraine once insisted such abuse never happened within its borders. And Pakistan asserted it was a subject beyond the purview of the international community.

At Nairobi, though, battered women and domestic violence are prominent on the conference's main plan of action.

Still, maneuvering over the agenda shows how the gut issues of women can so easily be subordinated in a real UN-style babble of competing global political interests.

The main contentious issues at Nairobi boil down to these: The developing countries are pushing the importance of achieving a certain level of economic strength before women's issues can realistically be addressed. The East Bloc is pushing peace and disarmament. The West is fighting to keep the focus on specific women's concerns. And, there is disarray over the Palestinians and apartheid.

Why, the West argues, should 10 years devoted to women get waylaid by politics?

But then again, as developing countries are so quick to point out, why shouldn't they?

Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who recently retired as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, cites what happened at the 1980 conference as a prime example of

the politicization that, in her view, renders much UN activity ridiculous.

"In a situation where women do not enjoy legal rights in half the world, after weeks of debate, the greatest obstacle the [Copenhagen] conference could identify to full equality for women was Zionism," Kirkpatrick said.

Palestinian and other Arab delegations captured the conference, focusing debate for three days on the problems of Palestinian women under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The political showmanship totally overshadowed the conference's work on more generalized women's issues.

The Israelis, predictably, seethe at the thought of the same thing happening in Nairobi.

"The question of the Palestinian women is a purely political question and what's operating is an attempt to turn the women's conference into yet another forum for confrontation with Israel," said Arye Levine, one of Israel's ambassadors to the UN.

But not everyone agrees. Margaret Papandreou, the American-born wife of the socialist prime minister of Greece, told a conference of university women last fall that Westerners have a lot to learn about the concerns of Third World women.

"I think," she said, that "each contingent has the right to talk about those conditions which most concern them as women. If it is a Palestinian homeland for the Palestinian women, if it is the problem of female unemployment in France because of the technological revolution, if it is racial discrimination in South Africa — who are we Western feminists to tell them what they should talk about?"

At Copenhagen, the West opposed placing on the agenda issues such as the Palestinians and apartheid.

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# 'Women's Decade' Ending

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heid, which get full consideration in other UN forums.

But as Nairobi nears, the West has begun to see things a bit differently. There have been three years of regional planning meetings. And, at a preparatory conference that ended Tuesday, the West put forward a compromise draft on apartheid, which focused on the women's aspect of the problem. Developing countries said it came too late for their consideration but added that they viewed the development as positive.

Nevertheless, nearly a third of the 300 paragraphs of the main conference document on "Forward-Looking Strategies to the Year 2000" were still in dispute.

"There are some countries that want [the disputes] so the conference will be chaotic. And they will be able to push their particular political points [in Nair-

obi]," said Alan Keyes, a deputy U.S. ambassador to the UN.

Keyes, incidentally, is the only man in the U.S. delegation, headed by Maureen Reagan, daughter of the president. And Keyes has been seen doing much of the negotiating for the United States.

Another dubious note has been sounded by the conservative Heritage Foundation, a Washington-based think tank with close ties to the administration. It says in a background paper that there are "mixed signals" for success at Nairobi.

"The United States should exert its influence to shape an effective, business-like conference that sticks strictly to an agenda dealing with women's issues," the paper says.

And if Nairobi begins to turn into a carbon copy of Copenhagen, it adds, "the only other option is withdrawal . . ."