

The First World Summit: Women and the Many Dimensions of Power

**Palais de Congres de Montreal
Quebec, June 3-8, 1990**

The first World Summit on Women and the Many Dimensions of Power brought female delegates from all around the world together. It brought them together to discuss the issues condemning women and keeping them from exercising power in their societies. The multitude of issues, ideas, opinions and suggested plans of action prompted heated debates and sometimes disagreement between the delegates. The atmosphere would flare up on issues like the ban on abortion in the West; how to secure a better future for poor women; the crucial need for economic influence; female scarcity in the top levels of news media; the need for more female politicians and how to change the rules of power; women in medicine lacking clout; women's knowledge and values that can save the environment; religions and their status-quo values towards women; legitimate recognition of prostitutes; and many other controversial matters.

Danielle Debbas, President of the host group, F.R.A.P.P.E. (Femmes Regroupees pur l'Accessibilite au Pouvoir Politique et Economique, i.e. Women for Access to Political and Economic Power) ardently monitored the debates, panels and workshops. She fiercely countered any potential complications in the proceedings and goals of the Summit.

Debbas concluded the First World Summit on a positive note saying: «We know women are oppressed - It's time to go to something positive. To change things you have to put women at the top of the pyramid⁽¹⁾».

Hence, the First World Summit ended with plans for another one in 1994.

About the First World Summit

The First World Summit came in celebration of the 50 years of Quebec women's right to vote. As mentioned above, it was organized by F.R.A.P.P.E and sponsored by **Voice for Women Canada** and **Women for a Meaningful Summit International**.

The main purpose of the Summit was to provoke worldwide collective action to enable women to perme-

ate all spheres of power in the hope of bringing about a new vision. To achieve this goal, the Summit committed itself to the fulfillment of the following specific objectives:

- Comparing experiences, while taking into consideration the cultural, social, economic and legislative differences of the respective countries
- Exchanging at the international level, the information on strategies carried out by women in their respective countries and developing new ones in order that women gain access to positions of power, prestige and high profile
- Creating an international network of mutual aid, exchanges and communication
- Developing proposals in order to enhance women's integration into the many dimensions of power
- Organizing international summits on women and power, every two or three years in a different country.
- Creating an international permanent secretariat made up of representatives from several countries, in charge of coordinating the holding of future summits and following up towards proposals stemming from the various workshops⁽²⁾.

Approximately 110 women from 39 countries attended this summit. For four days, they roamed, spoke, argued and suggested action towards the empowerment and emancipation of women in the various fields of power. Pannels, luncheons and workshops filled the Palais de Congres de Montreal. The many dimensions of power in question were:

- Power and Politics
- Power and the Economy
- Power and Art
- Power and Education
- Power and Reproduction Choices
- Power and the changing of the Guards
- Power and Civilization
- Power and Ecology
- Power and Language
- Power and Peace



«Simone de Beauvoir once wrote 'One is not born a woman, one becomes one'.

- Power and Religion
- Power and the Media
- Power and Law
- Power and Health
- Power and Work
- Power and Handicapped Women
- Power and Sexuality
- Power and Unions
- Power and Senior Citizens
- Power and Science

This highlights of these talks were:

Economy: **Michaela Walsh- US- Women's World Banking⁽³⁾**

Media: **Michelle Cotta- France - The Power of Women in the French Media**

Therese Sevigny-Quebec - Women and Power, What Power?

Ethics: **Marilyn French- US- Beyond Power.**

«Women have nothing to gain by a conquest of power as it exists in our societies, for it is but a synonym of control and domination. Women must aim for the power to create, to speak and to restructure their lives in harmony with nature and other human beings⁽⁴⁾.

Gisele Halimi- France- Ethics and Politics: New Citizenship for Women

«Women, men, how to share everything?» was Halimi's fundamental question. «The conquests of women are the conquest of democracy. »

Representatives from the Arab World

Dr. Julinda Abou Nasr, Director

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World

Dr. Abou Nasr's contribution to the Summit was her participation in the workshop on **Power and Education**, organized by Arpi Hamalian, president of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University, Canada.

Dr. Abou Nasr reviewed the background of women's education in the Arab World; Contemporary developments and progress; and the obstacles women face in getting higher education. She emphasized that in the past «social traditions did not allow for women's admission to the existing institutions of higher learning in the Arab countries». However, «through missionary, revolutionary and social movements demanding emancipation and social reform, women made significant progress in academics». Nevertheless, various obstacles still persist and hinder the access of women to higher education. but two main obstacles were highlighted. The first lies in the «socio-cultural traditions and rituals of our society which maintain the status of 'the second sex' for women, i.e mother, sister or daughter»; the second being school curricula, which «reinforce sexual stereotypes, promote drop outs and provide poor vocational training».

In conclusion Dr. Abou Nasr suggested primary corrective steps needed for women to develop their potentials in the Arab World.

- Promoting compulsory education

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(continued)

- Changing existing school curricula
- Eradicating traditional stereotype images of women in the family, books, the media and at work
- Providing women with opportunities for self-identification and self-realization.

Dr. Nawal El-Saadawi (Egypt)

Arab Women's Solidarity Association

Dr. El-Saadawi's contribution to the workshops was on **Arab Women and Power**. She discussed the various demises of women in the Arab World touching upon their social, economic and political status. Her emphasis was that women are still «a marginal minority in most political parties and organizations». For instance, Arab women have obtained what is called 'political rights' (voting, nomination and election) but have not become a political force.

For women to become a political force, Dr. El-Saadawi suggested:

- The creation of independent women's political organizations in each Arab country.
- Arab women should re-read their history with a critical mind. Heritage is a tool, which women should use for their own interest.
- Arab women should be active politically in parliaments, political parties, syndicates, labour unions, professional associations and so on.
- Arab women should communicate with other women all over the world.

Note: Membership to F.R.A.P.P.E. and copies of the original texts of the participants in the summit may be ordered by writing to: F.R.A.P.P.E., 822, rue Sherbrooke est, bureau 322, Montreal (Quebec) Canada H21 1K4, tel (514) 521-0152, Fax (514) 521-7686 ●

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- (1) Bagnall, Janet, «Women's Conference President Knows the Business of Power», **The Gazette**, Montreal, Saturday June 9, 1990, page A5.
 - (2) Booklet of the First World Summit «Women and the Many Dimensions of Power», prepared by F.R.A.P.P.E Women for Access to Political and Economic Power.
 - (3) See page 12.
 - (4) Marie Claude Lortie, «Le Gazon Pousse Meme dans les Bents», **La Presse**, Jeudi 7 Juin, 1990.