

The Fourth Interdisciplinary Congress on Women

By Irene Faffler

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Over 2,000 delegates from 104 countries answered the Roll-Call in the Hunter College auditorium, led by Keynote speaker Jeanetta Cole, President of Spellman College. Beginning with Algeria and Argentina, down the alphabet she went and delegates rose to their feet to proudly represent their countries. It was an emotional moment for me as I stood to represent Lebanon.

Speaking of the choices that face today's women, from what to cook to which strategy to take to win the next victory, Dr. Cole pointed to some important choices: «With whom shall we stand?» «Shall it be with the poor and powerless - with their poverty and sweatshops?». And finally she asked the question we all expected, «my sisters, what are we doing about racism?» Dr. Cole pointed out that there are no national boundaries to prejudice and ignorance.

«The decision is in our hands.» she urged. To illustrate this point, Dr. Cole told the story of a wise, but uneducated woman, Fanny Lou Haver. Several arrogant young boys saw her on the street one day and thought they would trick her with a question she could not answer. One of them was chosen as the spokesman. «Old woman,» he said, «this bird that I hold behind my back, is it alive or dead?» He had already agreed with his friends that if she said «Dead», he would raise his hand and the bird would fly away; if she said «Alive», he would crush it and it would be dead. The old wise woman answered, «Why, my son, the answer is in your hands.» Dr. Cole ended her speech with this poignant plea, «My sisters, the answer is in your hands.»

Challenged by this key note address, the delegates went out to attend panel discussions, lectures, film presentations, exhibits, etc., prepared by more than 800 participants on topics ranging from «Women, Land and Agriculture in Jamaica,» «Pioneer Canadian Women Scientists» and «The Right to a Healthy Life» to «Paid Work and Unpaid Caring for Disabled and Frail Elderly Relatives» and «Intimacy and Violence: a Cross-Cultural Examination of Homicide within the Family.»

The theme of «Women as Active Protagonists Instead of Subordinates» followed the delegates throughout the week. Over and over again we were urged to encourage women to go into science and technology, to take grea-

ter control of our environment, to devise programs that will be processes of empowerment to women, to make sure that we have resource sustainability, to get women to attend meetings on women, to organize support groups for women who are in leadership positions, and to emphasize the importance of coming together in groups, for it was felt that it is through groups that we can affect social change.

The plight of women was stressed in both developed and developing countries. Women with heavy work loads, working longer hours than men, their earnings crucial to family survival, was a picture drawn by many presenters who came from countries where illiteracy among women was as high as 75 percent. On the other end of the continuum, women struggled in developed countries to learn skills of competitive behavior in male-socialized network. A lonely task, that women in leadership roles also felt because of the lack of women role models, the difficulties of gaining hearings in committees or obtaining enough appreciation from their colleagues to maintain their self-esteem.

Throughout the conference there was a sense of waxing and waning of the emergence of women into society. Surely the struggles of the sixties and seventies should have brought more gains. Have we taken one step forward, only to go back two steps? One was reminded of leaders from the past with similar heavy hearts; for example, in 1935 Olga Knopf wrote, «A few years ago one could easily have taken it for granted that the battle of the 'independent woman' would end in success... It is not quite so easy now to be optimistic over the progress of women. One is bound to feel that advances are yet stable.»

As we heard time and again, there were many gains. Indian delegates, for example, reported that recent studies show some change in traditional self-concepts to a more liberated self-perception. Reforestation there is being undertaken by women in rural areas and is viewed optimistically as a major step forward, so much so that the Asian Women's Institute has adopted the theme of «Women and the Environment in an Age of Technology» for its 1991 conference.

It was Flannery O'Connor who said «Knowing who you are is good for one generation only.» This knowledge of an on-going struggle can be seen in the title of some of the presentations: «I'm not who I was when I started on this journey,» «Growing Visible: Women's Participation in Presidential Struggles in Mexico City», and «Rural Women and Welfare Reform: Becoming Self-Sufficient.» There are too many titles to mention.

The wealth of scholarship being accumulated in many areas of women's lives is heartening. Already research is

being undertaken to present at the Fifth Congress which will be held in Puerto Rico. Each contribution will lead to a clearer picture of women's lives and to equity which «speaks softly and wins in the end.»●



Dr. Irene Faffler, Phd in Drama and Speech is known as a pioneering, creative and leading member of the Beirut University College (BUC) Community. She came to Lebanon in 1959 as a professor of Literature and Drama when the College was still an all-girls institution (Beirut College for Women - BCW).

Dr. Faffler was the first to establish Children's Theatre in Lebanon on the stages of the College. She served as the Chairperson of the Humanities Division from 1964 until she was appointed Academic Dean of the College in 1982. It was unfortunate that Dr. Faffler had to leave Lebanon in 1987 upon the orders of her government (USA) for security reasons. She had stayed in Lebanon for many years despite the heavy fighting for she was dedicated to BUC and loved her students.

During her stay at the College, Dr. Faffler redesigned the curriculum of the Communication Arts department to introduce new fields and new talent. she is noted for delegating responsibilities to students in order to aspire innovation and excellence with the hope of elevating play-production to a professional level. She is said to have compassion for people, for art and for awakening hidden talents in students.