

A Sri Lankan Journal for Women's Liberation



# voice of women

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## POST BEIJING ISSUE



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## Post Beijing Issue

January 1996 ♦ Vol. 1 Issue 4

## In this issue

*OUR last issue focused on intense global and local preparatory work for the women's meetings in Hurairou and Beijing. Since then much water has flown under the bridge, some threatening to sweep us off our feet and some making the future clearer and more hopeful.*

*In this issue we try to convey something of what took place at the Forum level, the 'airing' we had and the mighty push given to the UN Conference alas! whose Platform for Action has remained up to this moment, a secret to us.*

*In our attempt to convey a micro view of the activities at Hurairou we have "A Woman's View" followed by "Images" - saying it in pictures, a visually powerful medium. Reportings from the Forum and the UN Conference are important articles among the files of the Summit happenings. From the UN Conference, Mongella's speech addressing the opening is documented here briefly. Also included are the activities of a few workshops which are forward looking in content when compared to the conventional set up and work of the Conference.*

*The rest of the issue includes a paper on Migrant Women along with some case recordings from the daily papers. This is backed by the famous 'trial' and sentence of death on Silky Farook, a Sri Lankan woman. The response by the Sri Lankan government at the time to our actions (reproduced elsewhere) revealed a different attitude to that, for instance, by the Philippines or India, where migrant women workers are protected by the state and extraditory agreements.*

*The biggest and cruelest weapon in the hands of patriarchy, rape, is once again highlighted in a paper by Danielle. The short story, 'I am a girl', takes up the issue from the migrant worker and the article on rape.*

*In our news among other things is a post Beijing meeting held by Voice of Women networking with SIDA delegates to Hurairou.*

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January 1996 ♦ Voice of Women ♦ 1

# Looking at the forum with a woman's eye

*Eva Ranawera*

I had the privilege of going to Beijing and joining the 36000 world women who gathered at the Forum convened in Huairou in the People's Republic of China from 30/8/95 to 9/9/95. I will add the 5000 strong Chinese delegation to this number, to convey the full physical strength of the gathering. In this context I can understand the anxious questions my friends levelled at me on my return from this awesome assembly.

What happened? What did you do? What did you achieve?

What happened? My friends had read of media reports of meetings held by the lesbians and the prostitutes (two categories of human beings, strictly female, who have yet to establish in the 3rd world countries, as having a claim to human rights), of the rain and the mud, the pillows filled with paddy seeds, escalating prices of food, bad accommodation etc. Were these the important things that happened in Huairou?

Although I associate myself with activities of the media, I cannot understand this attitude of the main stream publications. When the UN took up the questions of Palestine, of Angola, of South Africa, of Egypt, or of new admissions to membership, did the media highlight weather conditions, the escalating price of food, the judging of the reporters or any other personal happenings of prime importance, even more than the reason for which the assembly was convened? Is this what we call shades of patriarchy? Are women journalists patriarchy too since they have invaded the domain of long time patri-

archy, or do they hang on there by adoption of these attitudes? All this sounds in some dismal way a negative approach to the question.

Coming to more personal questions, what did I do?

I attended workshops selected overnight from a directory supplied free of charge; I saw feminist plays; listened to feminist songs sung by often black African friends as I ate my snack lunch; watched traditional cultural performances, watched films; Women in the earliest struggle for liberation; visited the Global tent, the book exhibition, the South Asia Pacific exhibition; registered for the main UN Conference which provided observer status to the accredited organisations; saw the Great Wall and other sights; and, bought lots of books from the Foreign Languages Department.

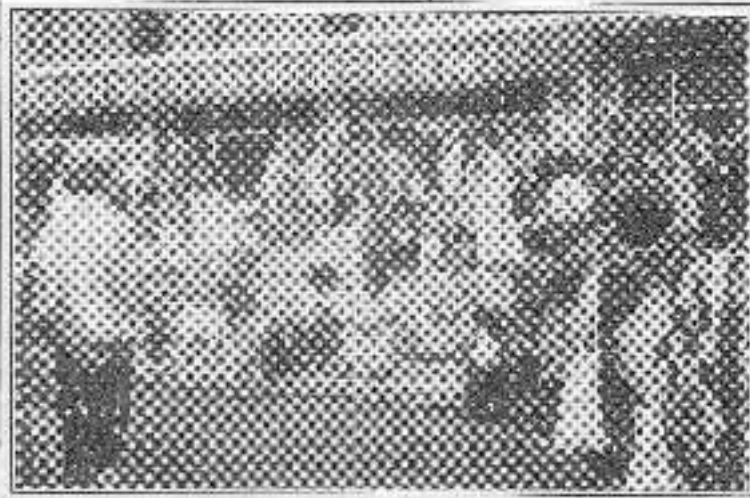
What did I achieve? What did we achieve? This is one important question asked by my friends and is relevant to all who gathered at Huairou and at the UN Conference in Beijing. How do we measure this, what is our yard stick? Although there can be no common yard stick, I feel each measurement be according to each delegate's needs and capacity. Nevertheless, I guess there are very few who returned with nothing achieved, at least touring beautiful, cultured China and realising a third world giant was rising.

For two years there had been hectic global preparation for this event. There were sympathetic responses by sisters from developed countries to get as many as possible to participate. There were funders who facilitated delegate's travel and other expenses during their stay in China.

The 12 major issues identified as the critical areas of concern were: poverty; education; health care; violence against women; effects of armed conflict; economic structures and policies; sharing of power; advancement of women; women's human rights; women and the media; women and the environment; and, the girl child, were discussed and debated at group meetings, workshops on a national and regional level, five regional preparatory meetings, and at expert group meetings. There were also three full sessions and two inter-session meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women (which served as the preparatory Committee for the Conference).

These twelve issues are to usher women into the main stream which is also full of cross currents and upheavals. For instance with the issue of poverty, or feminisation of poverty, the system is to give loans and other aid to the women to hopefully alleviate their poverty. However, it has tended to increase it as the already debt ridden woman has to utilise the aid in the non productive clearance of debt.

In this type of development process the once breeder of more hands, the mother, becomes the breeder of more mouths and thus the breeder of increased poverty. This system devalues her and she loses her traditional respect and homage due to deified motherhood. She stands faced with an entirely new concept and she is lost in the world of technology and the new sciences. She qualifies herself to the patriarchal claim that she is emotive, lacking in the sciences, planning and technology. Offering an alternative to the problem Asian Women's Human Rights Council



*Gathering outside the Plenary Session*

says "To tackle and overcome this problem what we need are not new indicators or scales of poverty. What we need is an index of violence to gauge the violence of dominant developmental paradigm that has in fact created this poverty and scarcity".

The outcome of all this is the Platform for Action, the final document to emerge from the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which highlights the concerns pushed forward by the NGO Forum so that they entered the document in full strength.

The Platform for action started in 1993 as a three page outline and served as a nucleus for the final policy document. Its objectives are realistic and strategic. The target is the acceleration of progress of women with the commitment of governments. Why this important document is an outcome of the Conference and not

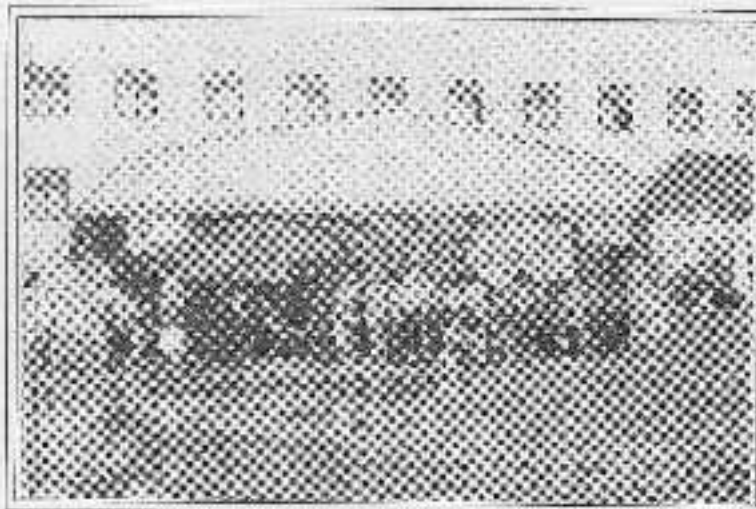
the Forum is obvious in a strategic manner. A document of the Forum is not committed nationally and will be a loud proclamation with no binding on the nation states that can implement such a thing. It is the responsibility of the nation states to implement the Platform for Action. Needless to say, the NGO's are the prime movers in the writing down of the concerns with information and recommendations supplied in national reports, group meetings, regional and national preparatory meetings etc. These formed the force behind the nation states.

The Platform for Action with 362 paragraphs in six sections is, in feminist circles, supposed to be the outcome of the "most inclusive and participatory preparatory process of any of the UN global Conferences of the 1990s".

Section V called on governments to develop national plans by 1996 including resource allocation for implementation. It also recommended a mid term World Conference and the appointment of a high level post in the office of the UN Secretary General.

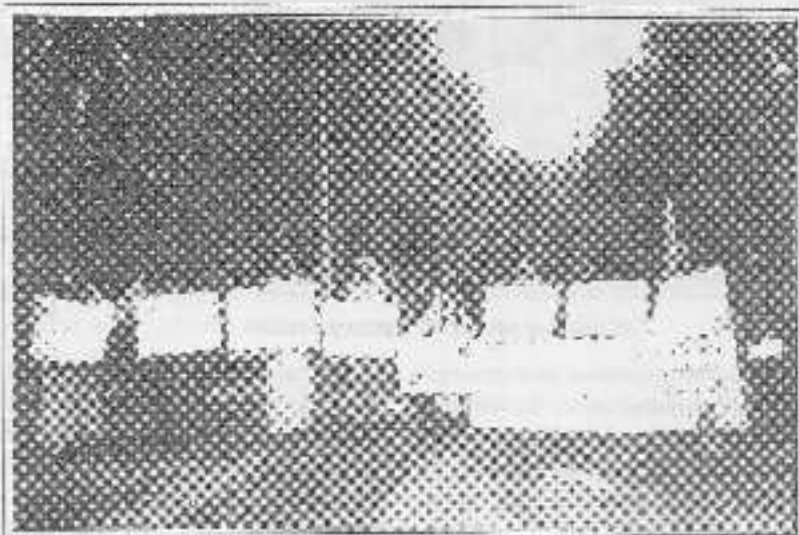
NGOs rallied in Huairou to protect gains made at the Population Conference held in Cairo. They supported and strengthened recommendations related to accountability and financial resources.

To my mind the most important achievement was the acceptance of the common target towards which all of us were travelling, the solidarity and awareness expressed and the tolerance of other stifling thoughts exhibited at a few rallies. ♦



*The Global Tent*

# Sights and sounds- Forum'95

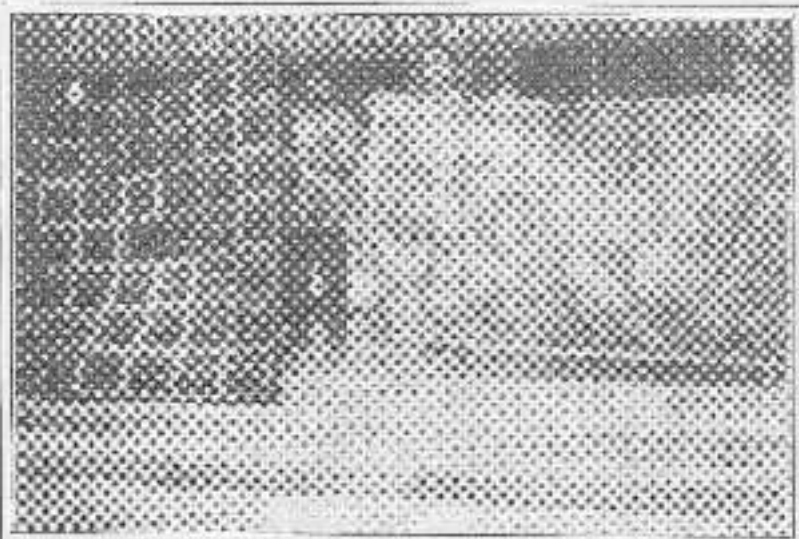


*Pictures & text by Kamani Fernando*

PROTESTS and demonstrations were held in large numbers at the NGO Forum on Women. Reassured by the words of the Executive Director of the Forum, Irene Santiago, protesters came out in large numbers.



"Protesters are free to use any areas in the Forum site, as the rules of the United Nations demand and we will go by that," said Ms. Santiago at a Press Conference during the Forum.



Protests and demonstrations on various issues were staged everywhere in the Forum site. Here a group of Islamic women protest against an anti fundamentalist group, which protested on a previous day at the site, against strict Islamic laws and regulations which contravened women's rights.

## The walls that spoke at the NGO Forum...

THE NGO Forum on women strictly adhered to the basic right of freedom of expression. Protests, demonstrations, distributing of leaflets and posters were some activities other than the formal sessions and workshops through which women expressed their opinions, views and thoughts. These "expressions" were held daily and drew large crowds - participants as well as observers - sympathisers as well as the curious.

The most important and lasting of expression at the Forum site were its walls. Walls and notice boards were many around the Forum site and every inch of space was covered with posters, notices and announcements.

A close look at the "walls" showed three categories of content - announcements, messages and the most important category of statements of support or protest regarding various issues - the environment, rights of migrant women, peace, gay and lesbian rights, and against rape and murder of innocent women, domestic violence, prostitution, sex tourism, bride selling...

Announcements included notices of forthcoming events, changes in venue, new events and calls for various groups of women to gather for various events. Messages ranged from notices about a lost drum (used at a musical event) to personal messages - so and so meet so and so at such a place etc.

The issues presented on the walls of the Forum spoke a million words during the nine days of the Forum. Their constant and prominent presence undoubtedly made every participant not only aware of such issues but realise their importance and the urgent necessity to work together to solve or remedy them.

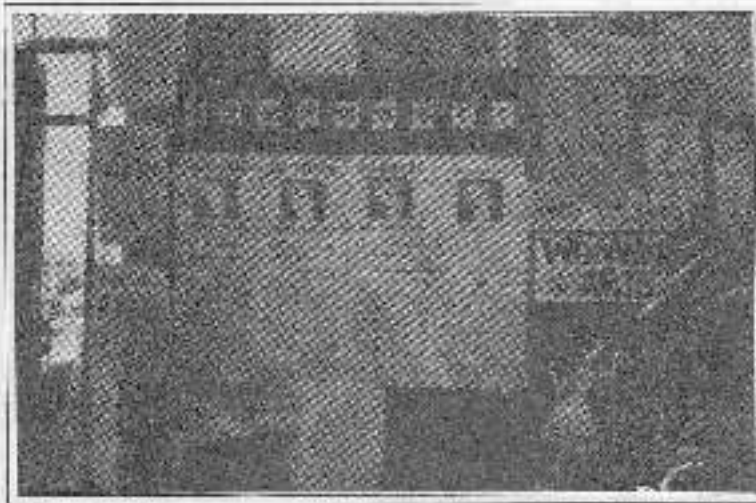
Some issues from the walls:

●● Collectively make a difference - Let's fight AIDS

(Africans in Partnership Against AIDS)

●● Support the campaign for justice and





solidarity with Filipinos and other Asian victims of military sexual slavery by Japan.

●● On the environment...

The earth is our mother and we are all her children - Hindu

Every human act of irresponsibility towards creatures is an abomination - Christian

Mankind's role on earth is that of a trustee - Muslim

The earth is but one country and mankind its citizen - Bahai

(Young Women and Environment - Bahai Young Women of Malaysia)

●● Ratify!!

International Convention on Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their families as one step forward in Defending human dignity and human rights!

●● Prostitution, sex tourism, bride selling, wife abuse, rape - are all human rights violations against women

●● Iranian Barsejji Women say: Suitable peace and security in the world is the prerequisite for the advancement of women.

●● Enact laws recognising mother as natural guardian.

●● No eviction without rehabilitation.

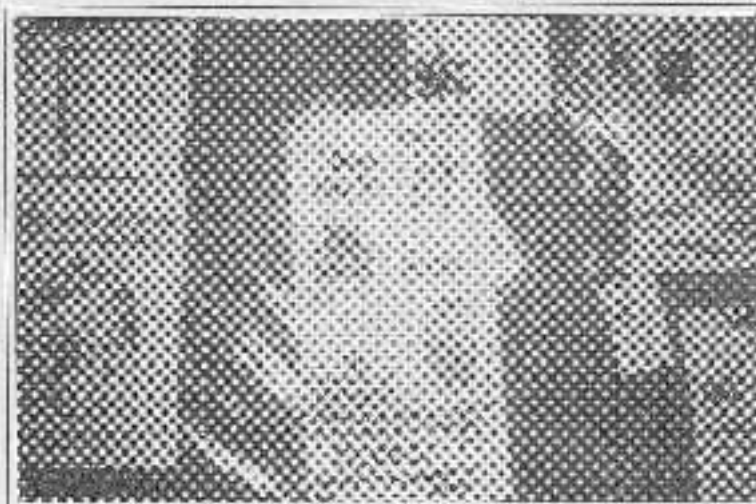
●● Undocumented women migrant workers are not criminals.

●● Equality is more than symbolic - it is divine.

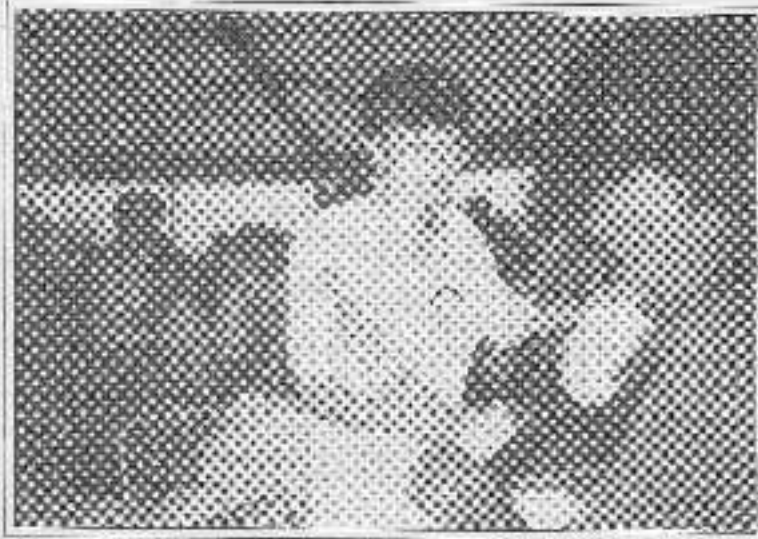
●● Equal pay for women's work of equal value - An Asia Pacific demand.

●● Involve women in official peace processes.

●● Wife assault is a crime - it is a community concern.







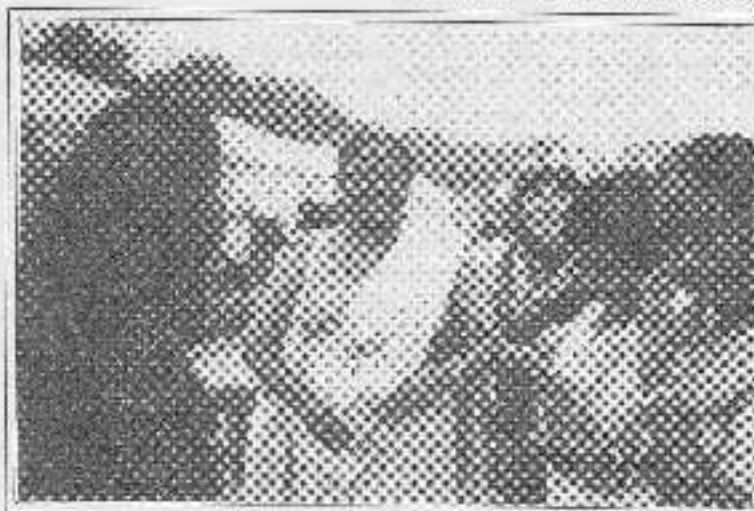
There was a mad scramble for Forum Kits. Here a volunteer hands out the bags containing the Forum Kit of program books and maps.

These cloth bags sparked off a controversy which was highlighted in the newspaper published for the Forum titled Forum '95.

A leaflet distributed at the Forum claimed Esprit, the US company which gave 38,000 cloth carrier bags for the Forum was using sweatshop labour to produce garments

and participants were asked to send back the label inside the bag to Esprit as a mark of protest.

However, subsequently, the Forum of 5th September 1995 carried an article refuting the contents of the leaflet. The newspaper quoted the Executive Director of the Forum, Irene Santiago, as strongly refuting the allegation against Esprit and stating that "Esprit makes their suppliers sign detailed guarantees that they are not exploiting workers. They are a model of this type of socially responsible corporation." (Forum '95 of 5/9/95)



The Peace Train from Finland to China left Helsinki on August 7th, 1995 on a 3 week journey to Beijing carrying 233 passengers from 42 countries to attend the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The train commenced its historic journey from Helsinki and travelled through Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan onward to China. The journey involved two trains - a Russian and a Chinese train and the passengers spent the days in workshops organised and presented by passengers

themselves and also visiting cities and meeting other women.

Pictured here are two passengers from the Peace Train including Manel Tiranagama from Sri Lanka.

"It was a wonderful experience," she said. "We met many women from many cities. However, as we came into China the train was heavily guarded by Chinese security personnel and we were able to meet people in China only after reaching Beijing. But in spite of this it was a memorable journey," she added.

# A woman's creed

## *The Declaration of the Women's Global Strategies Meeting*

We are female human beings poised on the edge of the new millennium. We are the majority of our species, yet we have dwelt in the shadows. We are the invisible, the illiterate, the labourers, the refugees, the poor.

And we vow: **NO MORE.**

We are the women who hunger - for rice, home, freedom, each other, ourselves.

We are the women who thirst - for clean water and laughter, literacy, love.

We have existed at all times, in every society. We have survived femicide. We have labelled - and left clues.

We are continuity, weaving future from past, logic with lyric.

We are the women who stand in our sense, and shout **YES.**

We are the women who wear broken bones, voices, minds, hearts - but we are the women who dare whisper **NO.**

We are the women whose souls no fundamentalist cage can contain.

We are the women who refuse to permit the sowing of death in our gardens, air, rivers, seas.

We are each precious, unique, necessary. We are strengthened and blessed and relieved at not having to be all the same. We are the daughters of longing. We are the mothers in labour to birth the politics of the 21st Century.

We are the women men warned us about.

We are the women who know that all issues are ours, who reclaim our wisdom, reinvent our tomorrow, question and redefine everything, including power.

We have worked now for decades to name the details of our need, rage, hope, vision. We have broken our silence, exhausted our patience. We are weary of listing refrains of our suffering - to entertain or be simply ignored. We are done with vague words and real waiting; famishing for action, dignity, joy. We intend to do more than merely endure and survive.

They have tried to deny us, define us, denounce us: to jail, enslave, exile, gas, rape, beat, burn, bury - and bore us. Yet nothing, not even the offer to save their failed system, can grasp us.

For thousands of years, women have had responsibility without power - while men had had power without responsibility. We offer those men who risk being

brothers a balance, a future, a hand. But with or without them, we will go on.

For we are the Old Ones, the New Breed, the Natives who come first but lasted, indigenous to an utterly different dimension. We are the girl child in Zambia, the grandmother in Burma, the woman in El Salvador and Afghanistan, Finland and Fiji. We are whale-song and rainforest; the depth-wave rising huge to shatter glass power on the shore; the lost and despised who, weeping, stagger into the light.

All this we are. We are intensity, energy, the people speaking - who no longer will wait and who cannot be stopped.

We are poised on the edge of the millennium-ruin behind us, no map before us, the taste of fear sharp on our tongues.

Yet we will leap.

The exercise of imagining is an act of creation.

The act of creation is an exercise of will.

**ALL THIS IS POLITICAL, AND POSSIBLE.**

Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman's voice singing somewhere, melody drifting like smoke from the cookfires. The army disbanded, the harvest abundant. The wound healed, the child wanted, the prisoner freed, the body's integrity honoured, the lover returned. The magical skill that reads marks into meaning. The labour equal, fair, and valued. Delight in the challenge for consensus to solve problems. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting. Secure interiors - of heart, home, land - so firm as to make secure irrelevant at last. And everywhere laughter, care, celebration, dancing, contentment. A humble, early paradise. in the now.

We will make it real, make it our own, make policy, history, peace, make it available, make mischief, a difference, love, fire connections, the miracle, ready.

**BELIEVE IT.**

We are the women

who will transform the world.

*(Written by Robin Morgan, in collaboration with Perita Houston, Sunetra Puri, Mubnuza Afkhami, Diane Faulkner, Corrine Kuntar, Sima Wali and Paolo Melchiori at the 1994 Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) Global Strategies Meeting.)*



## Reporting from the Forum

### Rhetoric or revolution?

*By Rina Jimenez-David*

"ACTION speaks louder than words," said Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference's opening session.

Mongella appealed to governments represented in the Conference to commit to specific courses of action, saying "This is the mission of Beijing". Each government must now set priorities, specify the resources it will contribute and declare what steps it will take to hold itself accountable to the world's women," she added.

Mongella likewise appealed "to each woman participating in the Conference and in the NGO Forum not only to serve as representatives of their governments and non-governmental organisations but also to become committed crusaders in the struggle in which we have been engaged in for many years."

With the staging of the Conference in Beijing, Mongella said, "All the indications point to a social revolution in the making."

In an address read by his Special Advisor Ismat Kittani, UN Secretary

General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said women are the key to development in every dimension. Equality, peace and development must reach every woman on earth. When the rights and hopes of women in all these fields are advanced, so will all human society come to benefit."

### Moral Crisis

Prominent women leaders around the world likewise addressed the Conference. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan challenged Islamic societies, such as her country's, to address injustices against women, including the prevailing preference for boys that has doomed many girls to a life of secondary status compared to boys. Other world leaders who spoke were: President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir of Iceland, Dr. Speciosa Wandira Kazahwe, Vice-President and Minister of Gender and Development of Uganda, and Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, Vice-President of Vietnam.

Bhutto described the situation of the world's women as "a moral crisis engulfing the world... a crisis of injustice and inaction, a crisis of silence and acquiescence... a fundamental moral issue."

### Solidarity

She also denounced the use of rape as a weapon of war and an instrument of "ethnic cleansing," calling it "as depraved as it is reprehensible." Wartime rape, she said, dwarfs other women's issues, calling the Conference to express its "complete solidarity with our sisters and daughters who are victims of armed conflict, oppression and brutality." "Their misfortunes", she said, "must be our first priority."



### Friendship in Asia Pacific region

IF "denuclearisation is decolonisation" for the Pacific region, in Asia, "structural adjustment is recolonisation".

Pam Rajput from India, speaking at the Asia Pacific NGO Working Group press briefing, said the process of economic globalisation and the shift to a global market economy "is creating a complete dichotomy between haves and have nots in the region".

With countries throughout Asia

rushing to adopt the free market economic model, the "billions at the bottom" as Ms Rajput calls them, fall prey to exploitation, such as piece rate workers, most of whom are women, who get paid a pittance for long hours of labour without social security or even job security.

Rajput noted that even as states throughout Asia have won their struggles for political liberation, **joining the global market brought a new kind of colonisation.**

"It's remote control of our lives," she said, through global brands and new found addictions to consumer products among both the affluent and poor of Asian societies.

But even affluence is no guarantee of equity for women, as the Japanese experience shows. Yayori Matsui, a former journalist who now heads the Asian Women's Center in Tokyo, noted that while "Japan has a developed economy, the status of Japanese women has not risen."

It is this "gap between economic development and the status of women" that is the biggest issue among East Asian women, Matsui added. "We need to find an alternative development model that will assure equal development for all, for men and for women," she said.

The Asia Pacific media encounter was enlivened by the appearance of Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, and two Asian women who play prominent roles in the Conference and Forum, Kunying Supatra Masdit of Thailand, Convenor of the NGO Forum, and Patricia Licuanan, current chair of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

In her brief remarks, Licuanan noted how "the Asia Pacific region started things rolling" in the international preparatory process leading towards the Conference, and that "the whole Conference should be grateful to this region" for its efforts to bring the Conference to fruition.

The Asia Pacific Friendship Tent (16 in the regional tent area) offers NGO women from the region a venue for meetings, informal caucuses and for sharing aspects of their varied cultures.

There were traditional delicacies and refreshments, national mail boxes, a regional bulletin board, public telephones, video, slide and music presentations, an arts and crafts display and reading materials. Different countries in the region hosted one day each.



## SHELTER A woman's issue

by Diana Pearce

TUESDAY night was a historic first: Wally N'Daw, head of the UN Centre for Human Settlements and the Secretary General of the upcoming Habitat II Conference (to be held in Istanbul in June 1996), hosted a round table to centerstage women and shelter issues in both the Beijing Conference's Platform For Action and the Habitat II Global Plan For Action.

The "super-coalition" of GROOTS, HIC Women and Shelter Network, and the ICW opened the discussion with a skit depicting a woman seeking to build a house for her family, being told as a woman she could not own/build property, then being evicted from her squatter house, then seeking redress in Beijing, only to find that women's shelter issues are bracketed.

The skit members - representing NGO voices from Latin America, Africa and Asia - joined the panel, which included eminent speakers such as the UNEP head Elisabeth Dowdswice, UN Volunteers head Brenda McSweeney, Ms Kenyatta representing the Nairobi Conference, and Pamela Mbuya, ambassador from

Kenya to Habitat II.

A discussion followed that included many NGO Forum attendees and brought the many issues, some not addressed in the PFA, others bracketed, that keep women from achieving equality in the area of shelter and housing.

These include laws that bar women from owning or inheriting property, evictions of squatters, violence that drives women from their homes and communities, lack of building (and housing management and financing) skills, the effects of SAP's in developing countries, the need for NGOs to monitor post-conference commitments, and the need for women to have a voice in the communities, in their nations, and globally, in the design and building of human communities.

The panelists urged that UNCHS make Habitat II a conference of partnerships, where there would be no back doors or side doors for women. They also pressed the organisers of Habitat II not to separate the NGO Forum and the UN Conference as they are here in Beijing, and to provide accessible facilities for the disabled so that they may participate fully.



## The search for a better life goes on

by Huorong Liu

FROM Tokyo to Riyadh, migrant women workers have been contributing to the much talked about fast economic growth in Asia.

Sad to say, their plight has not been given the same attention.

Irene Fernandez from Women in Detention in Malaysia told a Forum workshop on migrant women in Asia

that her country, which is trying to join the newly industrialised economies in Asia, employs some 2 million migrant workers recruited from Pakistan, Thailand, Bangladesh, the Philippines and East European countries. These migrant workers are either lured by higher paying jobs abroad that help them escape from poverty or violence, she said.

But life in a foreign country in general is not necessarily better, especially for women, as they are usually hired for 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs at low pay, and their working and living conditions are very poor.

According to the Asian Migrant Centre, there are an estimated 4 million legal and illegal contract workers in East and Southeast Asia alone and about half of them are women, who mainly serve as domestic workers and nursemaids.

Once they are brought into a country, for which they have to pay \$3000 each in the case of Malaysia, the migrant workers are not guaranteed a job upon their arrival and they may be resold to their employers, Fernandez said.

Many of them end up in detention centres as the legal papers which enabled them to enter the country are in the hands of their recruiting agents or employers.

Women migrant workers fair even worse as they are often sexually abused by their bosses in their workplaces and by immigration officers or police in detention centres.

"Some of them are pushed out of their countries by violence, only to find more violence," Gina Alunan Melgar from the Philippines said.

In Japan, immigration control bureaux and police often use violence during arrests and investigations of foreign workers. Toshiko Kadokawa, founder of the Forum on Asian Migrant Workers in Japan, told the workshop.

She spoke of a Chinese woman

who worked in a hospital and was hit repeatedly by immigration control officers in a detention centre when she was found to have an expired visa. She was deported later just as court procedures against the officers began.

The sex industry has been profitable in Japan as a result of the large number of women who are taken to the country for jobs that do not exist and they are instead forced into the sex trade.

The Migrant Women Workers' Research and Action Committee said in a report that 80% of foreign women in Japan work in the sex industry.

"There is a certain type of Japanese nightclubs known as 'Philippine pubs', so called for the many Filipino women who work in them as hostesses," she said.

Women who are married to Japanese and thus have stable visa status do not fair better.

"The lack of alternative job opportunities during the day in Japan drives them to take work in sex industries like nightclubs," said the report.

In an effort to address the injustices they suffered and protect them from further harm, migrant women workers are getting organised.

Their organisations are urging the government in concerned countries to recognise the situation and apply national and local laws for the protection of these people as well.

"There is a great need to pull together and make labour viable," declared Fernandez, who accused that the NGO "has downplayed labour."

## Key plenary points

*Aung San Sui Kyi*

While women and children have inevitably paid a greater price in

terms of war, there has been no known instance in history when women have started a war. Tolerance is the key to peace.

*Winona LaDuke*

We need to address the distance between peoples and the Earth, key factors in which are: the struggle for human rights, the lack of power and decision making and globalisation. Development and genocide are linked in many ways, indigenous peoples have a right to self determination.

*Irene M. Santiago*

Women need to develop modes of collective action that cut across specific issues and borders. For new forms of synergy to move the international women's movement forward, we need solid analysis that identifies root causes of problems and names of enemies.

## From Asia/Pacific

*Gita Sen*

The new elements of globalisation have created growing levels of disparities and heightened gender inequality. The economic growth miracle associated with parts of Asia is built on the exploitation of women's labour. The women's movement must meet the challenge of counteracting globalisation's adverse impact, by making states more accountable to their citizens and building up civil society.

## From Latin America/Caribbean

*Virginia Vargas*

An international community of women should enable us to assert our differences as well as our commonalities. Economic restructuring has not translated into greater redistribution. There is a need to build networks of solidarity to confront these negative forces.

### *Winnie Byanyima-*

Women need to work together against the uncertainties characterising the rapidly changing world order. While African women are building cross-party coalitions and gaining some influence, democratisation is severely constrained by limited resources and Africa's marginality in the world economy.

### **From Europe and North America**

#### *Charlotte Bunch-*

The perspective from the "belly of the beast." Women must provide a third option - an alternative from global hegemony and regressive conservatism. Women must offer an alternative to the demonisation of difference that marks religious fundamentalism and right wing politics. Women must demonstrate how solidarity can operate in the midst of diversity. We must continue to redefine the terms of social, political, economic debate, broadening our understanding of democracy and development.

## ◆ **Countering conservatism**

*by Nadia Hijab*

LIBERALS the world over are concerned by the swelling tide of conservatism. Women are especially worried. Religious (and non-religious) conservatives may belong to many faiths and disagree about many things, but they all believe in keeping women in their place. This is such an important issue that one of the Forum plenaries has been dedicated to it.

What to do? It is important to try to understand the complex strands that have come together to create this phenomenon in order to respond.

Poverty and under-development

are one strand. People who are unable to access resources seek scapegoats.

The absence of democracy is another key factor. In too many countries the press is muzzled and public meetings are banned. Citizens are treated as children to be guided.

In many Muslim countries, the mosque has provided both a meeting place and an outlet for expression of dissatisfaction with dictatorship and corruption.

There are many other causes for conservatism. Occupation by foreign forces is powerful fuel for fundamentalist fire, particularly when nationalists are unable to deliver. But the sense of being invaded does not only come from military occupation. It can be economic or cultural. A persuasive piece appeared in a Lebanese newspaper in the mid-1980s by a woman who argued for a return to the veil. The West cannot make us accept their culture and buy their products unless they find ways to make us reject our own ways, she wrote.

The domination by males of the interpretation of religious texts continues, of course, to be the major underlying problem. When female religious leaders interpret the texts, they are much more broadminded than their male counterparts. Even female fundamentalists are more broadminded.

Finally, the alienation produced by modernisation, urbanisation and other 20th Century phenomena drives people to look for security in tradition. On familiar ground they are in control.

Unpicking the several strands of the conservative phenomenon suggests some strategies. First, more developed program must be targeted at women's economic empowerment.

Secondly, women's organisations should seek to forge alliances on non-feminist issues. These can range from environment to democracy. If

conservative groups are willing to join forces on specific issues, so much the better. Even if no one is won over to an alternative point of view, collaboration on single issues could breed respect and the willingness to work within a democratic framework that is so lacking in the South.

Thirdly, national liberation can and must be combined with social liberation, as the women of South Africa have proven and the women of Palestine are seeking to prove, sadly with less success so far.

Finally, the fact that more and more women are taking on leadership positions in religious movements brings about change from within, and will help to end the view of women as second class citizens.

## ◆ **Valuing unpaid work can boomerang**

*by Birgit Wiig.*

FOURTEEN years women all over the world have asked that women's unpaid work be counted in the GNP, the Gross National Product. In Beijing a vast number of women's organisations have signed the petition for a clear and unambiguous issue in the Platform of Action. Governments should quantify and value the contribution of women's unpaid work in agriculture, food production, reproduction and household labour in the GNP and other economic statistics.

Were we to do so, we would certainly see a nearly total revaluation of most countries' Gross National Products. The value of food produced by women alone would double or triple the income - to say nothing about the value of rearing children.

In the developed countries with

high wages, the GNP would increase at least 30 or 40%. But do these figures save people and women from poverty? Yes and no.

How to draw the border line between paid and unpaid work? Men also do unpaid work, although to a much lesser degree than women. Repairing the bike is also necessary, but unpaid if you do it at home. Should this work be counted? Women preparing meals for grown-up men: is that work which should be counted? Should not all human beings, women as well as men do the work for their own good?

If you really counted the value of all the tasks women do under the present gender "apartheid" system, where women do the overwhelming part of the chores in the family, it could lead to a preservation of the present gender divided system. The value of the unpaid work is so high that women cannot "afford" to be in the paid labour force with low wages.

This is most likely to deceive. The value of private home work will always be under estimated, simply because the result of this work is consumed by the family themselves and therefore is not subject to taxation. For the sake of equality it is still absolutely necessary to keep a very clear definition of what type of unpaid work should be counted.

Certainly work in the field should be counted as income. The same goes in terms of caring for children, disabled persons and old people.

What we all should realise is that the GNP is a very artificial, superficial and incorrect way of counting. There is no reason to be impressed by the present male value system. But we feel so disturbed to read a UN survey claiming that the global output would increase by 20 or 30% if the unpaid work is counted. We understand the worries of developing countries about the effect on their possibility to raise money from loans or grants if their GNP rose remarkably.

We welcome the counting of unpaid work. But we do not think it solves the inequality question. We also feel offended that if this work is valued there would be no intention of paying for it. And in fact it is difficult if not impossible to pay for this work. The value is too high for the present national budgets. We think the best and fastest way to reach equality, is for men and women to share all jobs, paid and unpaid, including household work.

*(Birgit Wiig, editor of Forum '95, was an editor of the Forum '85 newspaper in Nairobi)*

## Time to bust some ghosts

by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

WOMEN spend long hours working, longer than men in fact. Much of this work is invisible and not given due recognition.

This has far-reaching implications on the lives of women. Something needs to be done about this inequity. It is time to "bust some ghosts", to borrow the words of Luisaella Goldschmidt-Clermont, a real pioneer in this field.

There are reasons why we need to measure and value women's work, but controversy is developing on this issue, mostly for spurious reasons.

We need to clarify the facts and put the agenda back on track.

Measuring and valuing women's unpaid work does not mean giving an ice-cream to this work nor to actually giving a salary or compensation. It also does not mean including this in the national income accounts.

It does mean implementing time-use surveys, collecting statistics and developing satellite accounts so that

the information becomes transparent.

The real reasons for measuring and valuing women's unpaid work have nothing to do with arguments based on fear of what might happen if...

Women's contribution to economic production and social reproduction is enormous, but this is hidden from official statistics, especially national income accounts, which provide a basic picture of how the productive activities of a society are structured.

Women and men spend as many hours on work that is not in the system of national accounts (SNA). This amounts to more than half of all economic work.

The magnitude of this unpaid work is enormous, and given a monetary valuation it would come to \$16 trillion globally, of which women produce \$11 billion.

Thus, women bear the largest burden of this unpaid work, carrying on average 69% of the work.

The magnitude and importance of this unpaid work, must be valued not only in monetary equivalent terms but in social terms. The unrecognised work of women (and men) may stay a labour of love but must be given full recognition by society.

Collecting real data - measuring and valuing - is the first step to giving real recognition to this women's work.

Social and institutional arrangements such as divorce settlements, credit systems, inheritance would need to change. Women would no longer be treated as economic non-entities.

*(Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is the Director of the Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Program -UNDP)*

# Migrant women domestic workers

Danielle Atkins

THE plight of the unskilled migrant woman worker is gaining more and more attention lately as the sometimes brutal reality of her life overseas and its resulting consequences are being recognised as matters of urgency for her homeland community.

The attraction to migrate overseas has increased dramatically since the 1970s. Unlike its neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka has no restrictions for migration which has opened itself as a large and accessible market for skilled and unskilled labour. The bulk of this labour force is comprised of unskilled women (78 per cent) mostly working as housemaids.

For most of these women migration is a viable option to escape an existence which offers no alternatives other than poverty for themselves and their families. With an increased number of women with O/L and A/J. looking for employment where there is little to be found, many are entering the garment industry. For most of the women migrating, their education (usually a minimum of eight years) and experience only qualifies them for either domestic or factory work; and, because they fall outside the age bracket preferred by the garment industry, it is migration that they turn to. Also, as the cost of food, expenses and health care have all increased, many look to foreign countries with aspirations for a life they know they can't have here.

Today women migrate

from all over the island unlike before when they mainly came from Colombo. The women come from every ethnic and religious background, but recently there has been a drastic increase in the number of young Muslim women migrating. In 1985 71 per cent of migrating women workers were Muslim in comparison to 79 per cent in 1994 (Dias 1995). A number of factors has encouraged this change in trend including, the majority of countries of destination being Muslim (the two countries with the largest number of Sri Lankan domestic being Saudi Arabia and Kuwait); the large number of Muslim recruiting agents (80 per cent) giving preference to Muslim women; and, the issuing of free airline tickets to Muslim workers. As a result,

there has been an escalating problem of forged passports in Muslim names. To prevent this, there's a call to offer free airfare to all migrating women regardless of ethnic or religious background.

## AN ESCAPE FROM POVERTY?

Migration is not only a way for the woman to achieve a better life for herself, it is more often than not a family strategy to alleviate economic problems. If this is the case, there are often doubts to whether the women as individuals will benefit economically from the move. As stated in a United Nations study of migrating women, "The likelihood of positive consequences is deemed to diminish when women are not major actors in making the decision to migrate and especially when, in societies where women's roles are circumscribed, they are compelled to migrate because of family need." (Richard 1993).

A study conducted by the Women's Bureau showed that 58 per cent of these women come from households which earn a net monthly income of less than Rs 300, while 93 per cent come from households earning less than Rs 1000 per month. It's sad irony then that in order to alleviate their poverty, the family falls deeper into it as a result of the expenses outlaid in the process of migrating. On average, it takes at least six months for the family to use remittances sent by the women for anything apart





from paying debts.

All migrating workers must pay Rs 3000 insurance and registration levy before departing Sri Lanka. Added to this if a woman uses a private recruiting agency to obtain employment the money she outlays can be astronomical. While the amendments to the Foreign Employment Act of 1981 have stiffened penalties for illegal practices of recruiting agencies, and the Sri Lanka Bureau for Foreign Employment Act states that no agent charge more than Rs 150 for fees, there is no enforcement of this Act, and agencies are charging anywhere from Rs 1000 to Rs 50,000 (including airfares) for their services. The fact that the women are willing to indent themselves and go through the agencies is proof of their determination and the desperation that they experience here.

In 1985 the State showed their acknowledgement to the exploitation by private agencies and the complications created as a result, by establishing the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). This was set up as a Statutory Board under the Ministry of Labour in order to: develop regulations and issue licences to recruiting agencies; set norms for recruiting agencies to follow; and, protect the welfare of the workers.

The SLBFE regulations demand that contracts between employer and employee are devised before departure; however, enforcement of these contracts is not followed up. There is also no agreed minimum wage and with the increase of women willing to migrate, many are going to poorly paid jobs after sometimes paying unjustifiable commissions to agencies.

Their vulnerabilities as commodities to be used and exploited are highlighted by the fact that they have little to no control or

bargaining power over their situation.

The International Labour Office states that during employment the wages of the migrant should be equal to that of nationals as well as them having fair and equal treatment with regards to working hours, rest periods, holiday with pay, welfare facilities and other benefits (ILO 1986). However, this is not enforced or respected in the majority of host countries. As well, the role of domestics even if they are not migrants is not considered a credible form of employment and employees seem not to be accountable to anyone for their treatment of employees.

While wages sent home for short term survival of the family can improve their standard of living, it is usually not sustainable and women are forced to migrate again for any long term benefit. Also, it is not uncommon for family members to abscond with wages sent for long term investment purposes. So on return, the woman sees no evidence of her hard work. Because of this as well as having more confidence and knowledge of how to manage their money, women migrating subsequent times are usually in better control of their finances and open independent bank accounts to deposit their money.

The chances of enjoying immense economic gain are little. Unskilled female domestic workers receive an average total earning of Rs 2761 per month in comparison to Rs 4416 per month earned by unskilled male workers (188 per cent of the housemaids earnings (Marga 1989).

### **A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE...**

The SLBFE explain that the

three major problems faced by employees is non payment of wages, lack of correspondence with family (restricted contact being a strategy used by employers to maintain control) and both mental and physical harassment.

A 1988 survey of 1224 unskilled returnees showed that 12 per cent of participants came home because of unsatisfactory working conditions, 189 were not given even half a day per week leave, and 37 female domestics could not endure the harassment so left (Ariyawansa 1989).

One way to remedy the troubles faced by employees who do not receive payments would be to establish a fund that can provide insurance against this as well as disability. Recommendations from a policy paper conducted by the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce (1993) suggests such a fund be administered by the Ministry of Labour through the SLBFE where at least one per cent of the total value of inward remittance earnings be contributed.

Working conditions are usually characterised by long working hours and heavy workloads that combine cooking, washing, cleaning and child minding. While not all experiences with employees are negative, there has been an increase in publicised cases where women were harshly mistreated and subjected to traumatic demands. In Singapore, for example, employers work in a rigid Chinese framework and there have been instances where women were forced to have compulsory pregnancy tests every six months, and have had to cut their hair in the name of cleanliness. Not only is this a total invasion on the woman's privacy, it is also a strategic control mechanism used to strip away the employees cultural identity, humiliating her into a subservient and oppres-

sive position.

In order to prepare the women for both the physical duties and mental pressures they might encounter in their employment, pre-departure training is provided. However, some women are reluctant to attend believing it is purely skills training. Compulsory pre departure training that incorporates confidence building and awareness raising about their rights and benefits as workers, problems they'll face and strategies to use, is vital for the welfare of all migrant workers and their families. The need to incorporate management techniques for families in the woman's absence is also a suggestion for training programs.

## WHO STANDS TO GAIN?

Already we have discussed the outcomes that the migration process may have for the woman worker, but there are others in this venture that can also benefit as well as lose from the experience.

Intermediary agencies are making big money out of this despite the laws and regulations that are supposed to prevent their illegal practices. The difficulty however in nabbing unlicensed agencies lies in that the women are willing participants in the whole deal going to these agencies voluntarily in desperation, therefore, they too are reluctant to complain or report them.

For the sending countries they stand to gain from the remittances brought in by migrant workers. In Sri Lanka the total of all inward remittances has become one of the highest source of foreign exchange earnings. As this comes to Rs 18 billion annually, the government relies on this type of revenue to help solve the balance of

payments. Also, the migration of nationals outside the country helps alleviate the growing unemployment problem.

Receiving countries benefit from this venture as they can enjoy a willing supply of cheap labour with virtually no responsibility for them. In some countries the governments also obtain money by levying each employer for every maid (in Singapore this is \$300).

For the families left behind, the majority survive, the minority might even better themselves. These are only in economic terms though. The long term emotional consequences for the family are not so bright.

## THE FORGOTTEN LOT

Even though the social implications are drastic for families broken up by migration, little attention has been given to the consequences. Children are placed in the care of either the father, a female relative, or neighbours and more often than not suffer emotionally and physically from the situation. This is evident through their declining grades and low attendance at school, and in the drop in health care and nutrition of the children (Fernando 1989).

According to an estimate in March 1987, 40 000 children under five years had mothers in the Middle East (UNICEF 1987). Healthcare professionals are seeing first hand the effects of migration on children and are calling for more Government and institutional support to provide for and monitor the well being of this group.

Found amongst children of migrant mothers is moderate to severe malnutrition with a major problem being the sudden termi-

nation of breast feeding. The weight deficiencies and other complications resulting from this are dangerous as they could lead to long term ill effects, stunting growth and mental capacity (Fernando 1989). As Dr Priyani Soysa explains, "Banning is of no use but advice by medically proficient people is very necessary to mothers so that they themselves can see the long term effects on their children when they are absent. This cannot be measured in terms of money."

Not only are young children at risk, but adolescent girls and boys are put under significant pressure as a result of family separation. It's not unusual for girl children to assume the mother role and in doing so be denied the opportunity to education for their future development. There are also numerous cases of sexual exploitation and incest occurring in the absence of the mother.

There is also an incredible need for post migration counselling not only for women who have had negative experiences, but also for their family members who have been effected by the ordeal.

## CALL FOR ACTION

The urgency of the migrant woman worker's problem came to the forefront on an international level in 1992 with the Asian Network of Women in International Migration Regional Policy Dialogue. As a result, a National Advisory Committee was established and reformed under the new Government. One question being debated now is one of compulsory age limits for women migrating. This is of concern to the committee after learning of instances where girls as young as 14 years have been sent abroad posing as older women. Again

showing the vulnerabilities of this group.

To reduce the exploitation of these women as a commodity to be traded in between countries and employers, there needs to be strict Bilateral Labour Agreements which will provide security of rights and protection of wages for the worker. These agreements should also ensure the registration of all migrants for accountability.

Because most host countries do not recognise the plight of the migrant housemaid a problem, there are no legal controls or monitoring system to protect the women. Therefore, it is essential that a women officer be posted at

each Sri Lankan Foreign Mission in countries employing Sri Lankan nationals so that each migrant worker has an outlet to turn to if her human and working rights are violated.

Ideally though, the negative experience for both the migrating woman and her family could be avoided if conditions were better in her homeland. Instead of forcing her in sheer desperation to leave, there should be more of an incentive for her to stay. It seems ludicrous that while this culture holds the family unit in such high esteem, there is nothing being done by the State to prevent its break up.

The strengths, will and deter-

mination of migrant women is evident through the sacrifices they make and risk they take by leaving their own safety net in order to realise their dreams. However, it seems that they have no chance to develop their self confidence for the improvement of their own situation as well as to contribute to the development of their own country. The coordination between the State, private enterprise and NCOs could provide these women with the possibility to enter self employment or other ventures in order to utilise their strengths and not to exploit their weaknesses. ♦

(See "Tears from Kuwait" under news)

## RANDOM MEDIA REPORTS

<i>Date</i>	<i>Name of paper</i>	<i>Report</i>
19 June 1995	Daily News	<b>FILIPINA MAID DIES IN KUWAIT HOSPITAL.</b> "A 22 year old Filipina maid has died in a Kuwait hospital due to injuries allegedly caused by her employer."
26 June 1995	The Island	<b>LANKAN MAID KILLED IN KUWAIT</b> "Kuwait police have arrested an Arab man and his wife for questioning about the death of their Asian maid."
29 June 1995	Daily News	<b>THREE LANKAN HOUSEMAIDS REPORTED KILLED</b> "The Foreign Ministry yesterday disclosed that three Sri Lankan housemaids were reported killed in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia during the past week."
29 June 1995	Daily News	<b>HOUSEMAIDS SUICIDE ATTEMPT IN ABU DHABI BRINGS HER HOME TO DIE</b> "A Sri Lankan housemaid in Abu Dhabi in a suicide attempt swallowed a detergent fearing that she had struck her employer dead. She was immediately hospitalised and after ten days was brought to Sri Lanka. She died two weeks later."
29 June 1995	Daily News	<b>LAWYER OF FILIPINA MAID HOPEFUL ABOUT APPEAL.</b> "The lawyer of a young Filipino maid sentenced to seven years in prison for killing her employer, who the court had concluded had raped her, said on Tuesday he was confident of winning an appeal against the verdict."
10 July 1995	The Island	<b>HOUSEMAID SUFFERS BURN INJURIES IN OMAN</b> "A housemaid who had returned to Sri Lanka from Oman was admitted to the Negoda Kalutara Base Hospital with serious injuries on her fingers. Shuhad told Kalutara South Police that her fingers were pounded by the land lady of the house."
20 September '95	The Island	<b>KUWAIT JAILS WOMAN FOR BEATING LANKAN HOUSEMAID TO DEATH</b>

## SITHY FAROOK

# Death and the maids

Kathy Evans

It was shortly after dawn prayers that the young woman was led out weeping from her cell to the prison courtyard. Minutes later, the seven-man firing squad shot Sithy Farook to death. The execution took place days before her 20th birthday.

Sithy Farook was one of an estimated 75,000 Sri Lankan maids working in the United Arab Emirates. Her execution last month was the final instalment in a journey that led her, at 17, from Colombo to seek a living in the rich oil states of the Gulf. She left behind a widowed mother and five sisters; she was to be their only source of income.

Her life was typical of that of thousands of other maids. She found herself working 18 hours a day for a policeman's family in a remote northern emirate of Ras al Khaimah. She never had holidays or even left the house.

One day, when her employers were out, their four-year-old daughter began acting up. At the end of her tether, Farnak took a penknife and stabbed the little girl to death.

Farook was one of the "lost people" in the Gulf, the 1.2 million domestic servants who lead hidden lives within the homes of Arab families. You can occasionally spot them at airports, or in



the segregated public parks, or through the black windows of limousines, but the only real clue to their lives comes in the news pages of local papers, which dismiss, in a few brief sentences, their frequent suicides and deportations.

For these women, a life of domestic drudgery in the oil states represents an opportunity to raise

the standard of living of their families back home. Their salaries, though low by Gulf standards, are up to five times what they could make at home.

They earn every penny.

Testimony collected by the Anti-Slavery Society shows that many start their days at 4.30 a.m. and work until past midnight; nearly half look after houses of between nine and 30 rooms.

Even more alarming is that a number - no one knows how many - regularly suffer physical and sexual abuse. The latest figures collected by the International Labour Organisation show only 69 cases of physical abuse recorded in Kuwait, 12 in the Emirates and only one in Saudi Arabia. However, these figures may indicate not so much low rates of abuse as maids' fear of reporting it. Their employers, after all, hold their passports and could retaliate with an accusation of theft that would result in imprisonment and deportation.

Employers are rarely prosecuted; most Gulf governments shrug off stories of abuse of maids as anti-Arab propaganda. An official admits that the ILO has done little to improve the situation: "They are a small constituency with no political clout". ♦

(Courtesy *Guardian Weekly*,  
*The Island* 1 June 1995.)

# ACTION FRONT

SITHY Farook was a Sri Lankan housemaid working in the U.A.E., who was executed for the murder of her charge.

Along with other organisations, Voice of Women demanded from the authorities an explanation as to how this situation could have come to such a violent conclusion, and what role the State took to protect

the rights of this young and vulnerable woman.

This incident highlights a system where the domestic worker becomes marginalized amongst the bigger players in a multinational game of politics and economics.

The case of Sithy Farook also emphasises the importance and urgency of advocacy groups to unite

and act to prevent the mistreatment of migrant workers which lead, in Sithy's case, to an irreversible and tragic end.

The following are correspondence and reports between concerned organisations (including Voice of Women) and the relevant government authorities that were involved in this case.

## Letter from NGOs

*WE have come to know from the newspapers, that a Sri Lankan worker in the U.A.E. has been executed. Different versions of the incident have raised serious doubts as to whether justice has been meted out to the worker concerned in this incident.*

*The accused Farook Sithy Unisa, according to the reports was executed by a firing squad for the alleged murder of a four year old child. We understand Sithy entered the services of this household when she was 18 years old and had worked for a period of two years looking after 11 children which increased to 15 later on.*

*We gather that during the months Sithy was imprisoned, an official from the Sri Lankan Embassy visited her on more than one occasion. The reports also indicate that the Foreign Ministry was informed of the situation by the parents of Sithy before the execution.*

*This raises many questions.*

- 1. What action did the Embassy official take to look after her interests?*
- 2. Why was the Sri Lankan public not kept informed?*
- 3. Was Sithy given a fair trial?*
- 4. As the reports of the circumstances that led to the death of the child are conflicting, could the coroner's report be made public?*
- 5. In situations such as these what is the responsibility of the state? We know that the Philippines, India and other Developing Countries have taken positive stands in similar situations.*

*This tragic incident reveals the utter disregard and apathy shown by the State towards our foreign workers who under trying conditions earn for us the much wanted foreign exchange. Women's Organisations and other concerned bodies have from time to time strongly protested against this apathy towards our workers. We once again call for close monitoring of the terms and conditions of work of Sri Lankan workers abroad especially the poorer ones who form the majority. Finally it is absolutely essential that in cases such as these that the public is kept informed so that a poor family is not isolated and rendered helpless in the face of such a formidable challenge.*

## Letter from the ministry of foreign affairs

Madam,

Execution of  
Sri Lankan Housemaid  
Ms. Sithy Uneesa Farook in the  
U.A.E.

I have been directed by the Hon. Lakshman Kadirgamar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to thank you for your letter dated 26.04.95 expressing concern over the execution in the United Arab Emirates of Ms. Sithy Uneesa Farook, a Sri Lankan housemaid.

I forward herewith for your information a report which I have sent to Ms. I.M. Abeysekera, Executive Director of the Sri Lanka National Committee on Women, who has raised a number of similar issues concerning this case, and which, I trust, answers your queries too.

Yours Faithfully,  
R.C.A. Vandergert  
Secretary  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

## Execution of Sri Lanka housemaid Ms. Sithy Uneesa Farook in the UAE

THIS refers to your letter of even number dated 24.5.95 concerning the above. This Ministry has carefully examined all aspects of the issue raised in your letter and a comprehensive statement on the action taken in this regard by our Mission in the UAE and this Ministry is given below.

This matter was first brought to the attention of the officers of the Consular Division of this Ministry by Ms. Sithy Pathuma Nilam (mother of the accused) on 25.10.94 by way of a complaint in which she had stated that she had received information that her daughter, who had been employed as a housemaid in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, one of the more remote Emirates of the UAE, had been taken into police custody for "some inquiry". In response to this complaint, this Ministry immediately called for a report from our Mission in Abu Dhabi requesting them to contact the relevant authorities as regard the veracity of the complaint as well as the present position pertaining to the case in question.

The Ras Al Khaimah Police Directorate had informed our Mission on 19.11.94 over the phone that she had been arrested on suspicion of murdering one of her employer's children, a four year old girl, and that a case had been instituted in court against her.

Upon receiving this information a representative of our Mission in Abu Dhabi attended Ras Al Khaimah Shariah Court on 30.11.94, accompanied by the Embassy's interpreter (who is a Sri Lankan Muslim) to look after the interests of the Sri Lankan housemaid.

At the trial, before a panel of five judges, the accused had confessed to the murder. A State Advocate appeared on behalf of the accused.

After hearing evidence, Ms Farook had been convicted of premeditated murder and sentenced to death. An appeal on her behalf was immediately lodged by the defence lawyer against the said conviction.

An appeal for clemency to the parents of the dead child made by the mother of the accused was transmitted by the Embassy. The Embassy also transmitted a letter addressed to the President of the UAE from the mother of the housemaid to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the UAE. Furthermore, on instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy too made an appeal for clemency on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the UAE. The Charge d' affairs of Sri Lanka personally met the Actg. Under Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this regard. This was followed up with a formal diplomatic note appealing for clemency.

At all times the family of the accused was kept informed of developments pertaining to this case.

After the appeal was lodged, the First Secretary (Labour) of our Mission in Abu Dhabi met the accused in jail who again admitted to the killing of the child. According to the report of the First Secretary (Labour) of 7.2.95: "Without any hesitation or fear, she admitted that she committed this offence. Her behaviour was quite normal. However, she could not recollect in detail, what actually happened at the time of committing the offence. She remembers the child biting her arm and she, having lost her temper, (in return) stabbing her with a pen knife cum nail cutter, which was in her hand at that moment". She had further stated that when she found that the child was dead, she got so frightened that she wrapped the dead body in a rag and kept it in the adjoining garden, before her master returned home after work.

The report of the First Secretary further states that the Superintendent of the Jail had stated that she was referred for medical examination to check her mental condition but that the medical report had shown that she was normal. When the Embassy pursued her request to intervene to get her transferred to Sri Lanka, the Superintendent of the jail had explained that there is no provision in the Law or any mutual Agreement between the two countries to effect such transfer.

The Court of Appeal had found that the crime of deliberate murder by the accused had been proved in the Court of first instance and had re-confirmed the death sentence.

The Director of Prosecutions of the Shariah Court had explained to the First Secretary (Labour) of the embassy that, according to the Shariah Law under which the case was heard since both parties were Muslims, the Next-of-Kin has the right to ask "blood for blood" in a case of murder and it is the next of Kin and no other person who pardons the accused. Even the Ruler cannot change a verdict of a Court of Law without the consent of the Next-of-Kin.

The Report sent by the Embassy further states:

"In this particular case, H.H. Sheik Rashid bin Humaid Al Qasimi (son of the Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah), who is the Head of Courts, having considered the plea of the housemaid's mother and housemaid's age, requested the father of the dead child to consent to a lesser punishment but the father of the deceased child had totally refused it. He had asked him "Sir, how can I pardon a person who has brutally killed my innocent daughter, who was only 4 years of

The father of the deceased also had refused the plea of H.E. Sheikh Abdul Wahab Al Mashashain, Chief Priest of the area, who had asked him to pardon the accused. The First Secretary's report further stated that the father of the deceased child had been coming to court practically everyday to get the execution order carried out expeditiously. When the prosecuting officers had requested him to re-consider this case and change his attitude, he had told them in anger, "If you can't execute the order, I will execute it".

The measures taken by the Sri Lanka Embassy in the UAE was also brought to the attention of the Hon. Minister of Labour and Vocational Training who had led a delegation to the UAE from 2 - 4 April 1995. The delegation was satisfied with the steps taken by the Embassy to protect the interests of the accused.

In view of the above, it must be emphasised categorically that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the Embassy in the UAE, had taken all possible measures within the framework of the legal system prevailing in the UAE, to protect the interests of the accused. However, according to the prevailing law in the UAE, since the life of the accused had been in the hands of the father of the deceased, who refused to pardon her, the execution of the death sentence had been inevitable.

With regard to the query raised by you concerning a mechanism to deal with such matters, I wish to inform you that the Foreign Ministry has issued a circular letter to all our missions in the Middle East countries to constantly keep in touch with the relevant authorities and report back to the Ministry of any Sri Lanka national who has been taken into police custody or jailed.

In addition, it may also be noted that with the recent enactment of the Transfer of Offenders Act No 5 of 1995 providing for transfer of convicted offenders to and from Sri Lanka, this Ministry along with Ministry of Justice & Constitutional Affairs is pursuing, as a matter of priority, the conclusion of bilateral agreements for such transfers as required by the Act, with due priority being given to those countries where there are large number of Sri Lankan nationals who have been imprisoned.

With regard to the question raised by you concerning migrant women, the question of Sri Lanka acceding to the Convention of Migrant Workers is under active consideration. The views of a number of Ministries and Departments including the Ministry of Labour have been obtained and those of some others are awaited.

I trust that the above addresses fully the issues raised in your letter under reference and that you are satisfied that all possible measures by way of providing assistance to the housemaid concerned had been taken by the Ministry through its Mission in the UAE. ♦

## SITHY FAROOK

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### Our Comments

THE Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be congratulated for their enactment of the Transfer of Offenders Act No. 5 of 1995 which provides for the transfer of convicted offenders to and from Sri Lanka. Unfortunately though, for Sithy Uncesta Farook this enactment comes too late to save her from execution in a foreign land.

While we can only wonder about Sithy's fate if she was tried in her own cultural environment instead of under a strict Muslim State (even though Sithy was Muslim, the vengeful and harsh punishment of blood for blood is not considered in Sri Lanka), it is not our position here to question foreign laws (no matter how ideologically opposed we are to them).

However, we can and must question the competence of the Sri Lankan Mission in the Emirates whose task was to work in Sithy's best interest. The report given by the First Secretary (Labour) in Abu Dhabi is concerning as it is full of contradictions and judgements that show their partisan against Sithy.

For example, the First Secretary states how Sithy admitted to committing the crime "without any hesitation or fear... Her behaviour was quite normal". Are we to believe that the First Secretary could determine Sithy's feelings and speak so confidently about her emotional state of mind on her behalf? Is this person qualified to assess and report on Sithy's mental condition?

Also, if Sithy's behaviour was, according to the First Secretary, "normal", then why in the next sentence does this person state how Sithy could not remember exactly what had happened? To even the untrained observer this indicates Sithy must have suffered a certain degree of trauma and confu-

sion which is far from "normal".

If it is the case that this incident was pre-meditated, then the First Secretary's report leaves us wondering what exactly pre-meditation means. From Sithy's evidence, the stabbing does not look pre-planned at all. The report describes that in return for the child biting her, Sithy stabbed her with an instrument she was presumably already using. But if this act was a pre-meditated and calculated decision by Sithy it would not be the result of such a spontaneous chain of events. Also, if her intention was to kill the child, it does not follow that Sithy was so frightened when she realised the child was dead.

If this was a pre-meditated murder, the report gives no indication that any attempt was made by the Sri Lankan Mission to help the courts understand what drove Sithy to be so brutal. Therefore, they were silent when given the opportunity to highlight the often oppressed conditions of women in Sithy's situation.

Just as the courts passed judgement that Sithy was guilty of pre-meditated murder, it seems that the representatives of the Sri Lankan Mission in Abu Dhabi are guilty of drawing pre-conceived conclusions about Sithy's guilt. Could they have adequately and convincingly defended their national when their report shows such judgement against her?

One must also question why this matter was not brought to the public's attention earlier so that Sithy could have at least had the support and commitment of advocacy groups back home in her favour.

While nothing will change the fate of Sithy and the dead child, her case can be used to ensure no other national is forced to defend themselves in the complete isolation Sithy was faced with. ♦

# R A P E

*Danielle*

THE regularity and seriousness of gender-related violence is growing at an alarming rate. While violence against women is by no means a new phenomenon, the silence that has protected this issue from public action is at last breaking down.

"Violence against women", as stated in the Report of the Third Committee of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, is "any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

Every attack on any individual is a violation of their rights no matter what degree of physical injury is caused. All violent acts are committed so that an individual or group can identify and solidify their power over another through use of mental and/or physical intimidation and force.

Rape then can be described as one of the most visually evident signs of the power imbalance between men and women, not only seen by the physical characteristics involved, but also by the justifications for the rape given by abusers and at times by the com-

munity.

Rape is a crime not specific to one country, culture, race or class of people. It can affect every type of person in any situation. A rapist cannot be identified by his level of education, income or degree of social mobility, just as a rape victim cannot be classified in a typical mould.

While a rapist does not exist exclusively in one particular environment, the social setting does have an influence on his behaviour. For it is within this setting that social norms function with the rapist accepting and internalising what rights he believes these norms permit, and the degree of power he holds because of them.

The act of rape is the final projection of the rapist's fantasies on to a victim who serves as the object through which he can exert his "rights". These fantasies are illusions that stem from many factors including: his ideas about sexuality; sex role socialisation; and, the amount of control he is capable of exerting over his victim.

Significant in understanding the rapist's behaviour is looking at his perception of his own sexuality. For many people (and I'd imagine all abusers) the concept of sexuality does not extend past the first three letters - SEX. Sexuality, though, encompasses the physical as well as emotional aspects an individual experiences



once they've acknowledged themselves as sexual beings. Each person's concept of sexuality interprets their attitudes, ideas and images about sexual and gender issues.

Sexuality is a natural and important part of a person's make up. As such, everyone should be able to explore and understand their own sexuality without the constraints inflicted by a society who is quick to enforce ready made descriptions of sex and gender roles. Because of the taboo-like nature surrounding sex and sexuality, ignorance leads to misconceptions which creates an environment for rape to occur, and more dangerously, for rape to be justified.

Myths about men, women and sex that perpetuate in a patriarchal society highlight an image of physical strength and energy associated with masculinity; and, the self control and passiveness associated with femininity. By internalising these images, some men are convinced that "nature" allows them to exercise their right to satisfy their sexual urges. Not only does this belief excuse the rapist's behaviour, it also objectifies the woman as an instrument that can be used at the mans disposal when his hormones are 'out of control'. The act of rape is the final reality of this fantasy - it is the realisation of his power over his victim.

By identifying male power and control as the root cause of rape, the needed solutions require an improvement in the status of women. Unfortunately, the dichotomy of women as either the virtuous, wholesome nurturer of the community, or as the alluring temptress causing the downfall of man, enables a sometimes un-

sympathetic public to judge the victim and not the rapist. Too often it is the victim who has to prove her innocence after her past, character and actions are all analysed. Such an overwhelming amount of attention placed on the victim could make it seem almost like she was the only party involved in the whole incident.

The result of being put on trial for a crime you never committed and being ostracised from the community because of it, is a major reason why a lot of women never report the incident. Families also discourage women from



making a rape public knowledge for fear of social repercussions, especially if the woman is single as it will surely reduce her chance of marriage proposals in a community that rejects 'tainted' women.

The procedure involved in filing a complaint, obtaining representation and going to court is not only highly traumatic, it can also take up to six years and can be very costly, which are other deterrents for women to report the rape. On a more optimistic note, however, an attempt to reduce the amount of psychological trauma on the victim has been made with the installation of Women's Desks at several police stations. This service functions in

stations around the island, and began in 1991 after recommendations from the Women's Bureau.

Educating law enforcers and medical professionals to be sensitive to gender issues including violence is also necessary to reduce the isolation felt by the victim after the rape. Educating the community is a much harder task.

It is also vital that responsibility for these hideous crimes be shifted away from the victim and onto the rapist. To start with, suspended sentences must be abolished and a minimum sentence should instead be introduced. It is pointless to just slap the rapist on the hand, tell him he has been bad, and then release him back into the same environment where he committed the crime. What deterrent is there for him? While attention is given to the victims, by telling them to change their lifestyles so that they are not seen as provocative, or making them leave their surroundings in fear

of future attacks, there is no attempt to change the behaviour of the abuser to prevent attacks from happening.

Counselling plays an integral role not only in the recovery of the victim, but also in the reformation of the rapists. Unfortunately though, the latter is not even seen as a priority. By suspending sentences, there is no way of ever insuring that the rapist has contact with any social worker or counselling service. However, with any reformation, there has to be a willingness by the perpetrator to accept responsibility, then commit to change. Meanwhile, the regularity and seriousness of gender-related violence grows at an alarming rate. ♦

# I am a girl

*Eva Ranaweera*

MY name is Seela. Just plain Seela. How often I have compared my name with names like Chaturani, Ayoma, Danalakshmi, Parameshwary. What beautiful sounds these names make, like water running over silver keys.

When I meet casual people I tell them I am Chaturani. Sometimes, I go further, and tell them I am Vasanthi Chaturani. I look in the small mirror my father used for shaving his face and stare sadly at my sallow skin and dull eyes. I used to rub lemon pulp on my face and put a piece of cucumber on my eye lids hoping for a bright look. That was the advice my family gave. I have read this in women's papers too.

I lived with my father in the one roomed hut we occupied when mother was here with us. I am twelve years old and go to school.

We were looking forward to building a nice red-tiled house like Asilin Nanda's with two rooms, one for my father and mother and one for me, all to myself. I was looking forward to that dream coming true. I think mother also had such a dream. Father, always being a dreamer, did not need additional dreams to burden him. My mother went abroad to save enough money to build our dream house.

She wished me to study hard so I could get a job better than what she had. I thought then I need not leave my family as mother had to, and go to a foreign country as a domestic. I studied very hard and did my home work and house work too. My hand

writing improved very much and my mother wrote back wonderful things about my hand writing and my letters. I felt she was near me. I told her how eagerly we were waiting for her return to start building our house.

At first I felt a little sad that she had to send us some of her earnings for us to live on. That meant her savings would be less than what could be. In my impatience I urged my father to save all the money mother sent us. I thought we could add what we saved to her pile of savings when she returned. What a surprise that would be to her. That was what I thought then.

Father did not save the money. He used all the money mother sent us, on his liquor. He came home at night staggering drunk and unaware of anything around him. He beat me for not cooking tasty food. Some nights I went to sleep without my dinner.

Father began to kick me and plod me with his foot when he found I had fallen asleep before his return. Was it because I was not a pretty daughter or was it because I could not cook tasty curries?

In my letters I did not tell my mother how unhappy I was. I thought that would make her unhappy too and she would even think of coming back home without earning and saving money for our red tiled house. So I wrote to her about our dream house, my room with a bed and a window and her large room next to mine in our red tiled house with walls plastered and floor cemented just like Asilin Nanda's. I told her about some new flower seeds from Saudi Arabia, so that we could have rare flowers blooming in our garden. It would

not cost her anything if the seeds were from her garden.

We planned for a pomegranate garden the like of which mother described. She talked of tumbili colored oranges, which were sweeter than the green coloured ones that grew here. We both wished for grape vines but mother said since it already grew here it was not profitable and, it was difficult to bring sprigs of plants, but she could easily bring seeds.

I did not refer to father who by now was becoming a dreaded demon. I wonder whether she felt how lonely I was. I teared the nights when father came home drunk. As my zest for life reduced my frocks became dirty and uncared for. I was taking little care of myself. But I waited for mother's letters even at this juncture. I had hopes of starting my life in a beautiful, clean house. I thought she would buy me a table to write on and of course a bed to sleep in. Beautiful dreams can adorn a lonely life. Nobody can take away my dreams but they become difficult to come by when nights are lonely and lashings are expected.

I dared not cry out because that made father more angry. Also that would not be lady like. I know only the girls in the poor slums had such behaviour. I thought it best to avoid father when he returned late in the night smelling of liquor.

Now I wish I had discussed my problem with my mother, or gone away to grand mother's house or confided in my friend Neela. I did not expect this, not in my wildest dreams. Although I had no previous knowledge of what happened to me, I began to feel uneasy every time father came home drunk and turned

abusive. On such days the next morning he would get up sheepish and shy, waiting timidly for his tea. When he had gathered enough courage he would stroke my head lovingly as he used to do in the happy days when mother was with us. He used to tease me calling me little mother, *punchamma*.

Meanwhile grand mother thought I was growing up too fast and needed a mother's protection. Father laughed at her and said to her he was father and mother all in one.

I did not tell her that father drank in the night and that I dreaded his fits of bashing, which became more frequent in time.

Grand mother sold vegetables in the village. She went out with the basket on her head calling 'Keera, Keera' in a sing song tone. When I was very small before I went to school and before mother went abroad to make our dream house come true, I accompanied grand mother on her Keera selling trips. Father did not approve of this. He said I would become a vagabond like Nanda, who was out the whole night. Mother thought I would get dark skinned going in the sun.

Anyway when I went to school all that stopped and I started a new life with father and mother at home and me going to school with Asika Nanda's daughter, Soma. It was indeed a happy time. Some days father came with me and Soma if his carpentry work for the day was on our way. He would buy us two toffees, one each and a cigar for himself. We walked happily to school chatting all the way and father went to his work place.

One day he fell off a tree he was cutting and injured himself seriously. Our hut was like a funeral place that day. Mother wailed and grand mother came

from her place to add to the loud weeping. Father was taken to hospital and he stayed there for a long time. I could not keep track of the days. They were long and miserable days not knowing whether father's life could be saved.

We had no money and mother began to weave carjans to sell. It did not bring us much money. I am tracing my life to see which is darker, this present plight or the beginning of our misery.

Finally when father came home with all his wounds healed his right arm remained useless. So mother continued her struggle to eke out our living. She was forced to look out for another way of keeping our house going. She decided to go out of the country to work as a domestic aid in Saudi Arabia. Father was very angry but later he realized we had no choice. Mother said she would come home before I became a big girl. We had a lot of trouble getting the agents fee for mother to obtain her job. Now our land is mortgaged to our neighbour Jinadasa Mahattaya but mother said she would redeem it very soon. We had lots of hope and that made life exciting.

Three days ago was Amawake, the moonless night. All was dark. The wind made weird noises coming through the plantain leaves and tearing them. I was shivering in fear. Our bottle lamp had blown out without oil. When mother was here, on dark Amawake nights, I crept to her mat for safety and peace of mind. Devils disturb you at Amawake, because they come in the dark and look for nice girls to disturb them, so they will not be nice again.

When I was shivering and pretending mother was near by on the other side, I heard father stagger in, dead drunk. He was shouting for the lamp, shouting for

dinner and I was too frightened to answer him. I thought he would start beating me for being what I am, for not being mother, for not cooking tasty curries. I was hungry myself but more frightened of father than other days. I heard father trying to balance himself, knocking on the wall in the dark and then on the table. He was groping. Suddenly he stepped on me, stooped down and grabbed me. I was lying on my mat.

He was very cruel and very dirty. I hated him for what he did to me. In my pain I fainted, maybe more than once. When I came to my senses I found myself wet and sticky and in pain. I did not groan because I did not know where he was.

In the morning I saw I had been bleeding. He was fast asleep in his *huru eida* (camp cot) snoring loudly. I got to the well and washed myself clean. Every thing was burning. The cool water did not stop that but made it worse. I was hot, sore and lifeless.

That was three days ago when I lost my dream and my future. Since then nightly he tore me apart. I had not visited my grand mother for a few days so she came to see how I was.

She found me sick and with high fever. We went to the hospital and from there to the police station. I am weary of this. I think he is hiding from the police. I had to tell them what he did to me. They ask so many questions. Indecent ones. It was not easy. Grand mother took me to her house.

We have had two more police visits after that.

My future is staring at me like a depthless void -staring at me.

Will my mother come back? What will she say?

I will write to her and tell her we don't need a red tiled house any more ♦

## Post Nairobi... What's been achieved?

CENTRE For Women's Research (CENWOR) held a two day 'Post Nairobi Workshop' in August to discuss and analyse the development of the status of women in Sri Lanka during the past decade, and to address issues pertinent to women's empowerment for the future.

Representatives from the public and NGO sector participated in the workshop with sessions including:

- The Impact of Law on Women's Rights (Savitri Goonesekera)
- Gender based Violence (Kamalini Wajayatilake)
- Women in Politics (Wimala de Silva)
- Mobilisation for Community Action by Women (Kamala Peiris)
- Women and Health (Priyani Soysa)
- Women and Media (Kumilini Samuel)
- Women, Education and Training (Swarna Jayaweera)
- Women, Science and Technology (Nimal Amarasingya)
- Women in the Economy (Swarna Jayaweera)
- Women Overseas Domestic Workers (Malsiri Dias)
- Women and the Environment (Kamini Vitharana)
- Trends and Issues (Kumatri Jayawardena)

Throughout discussions it was clear that for any change to occur there has to be a common voice amongst advocates who raise the issues, as well as a commitment from the State and law enforcing institutes that they will support such change. Gender sensitisation at all levels, from grass-roots to the national level, needs to exist for women to enjoy total and equal participation in the development of this country as well as obtaining the benefits such development offers. However, because existing social, legal, political, educational and economic systems do not support an egalitarian community, women don't challenge the oppression they suffer for fear of being further victimised. In isolation, therefore, they suppress their strength as an effective group of change agents.

The past decade has seen an increased focus on gender issues with women's roles changing due to factors such as the open economy and the civil conflict.

The role of women in NGOs has done much to

create awareness and understanding. Their influence politically can be seen by their successful campaigns in 1988 with the call for elections and in 1993 with the child rape case. The most significant event to occur in the political field for women is the Amendment to the Penal Code.

The media has done much to highlight issues such as violence against women and the plight of the migrant worker. With the increase in alternative media focusing on women, gender issues have been brought to the public agenda. However, the media still have a while to go in ceasing the stereotypical portrayal of women and also in rectifying the sensational and trivial style of reporting gender issues.

While women have been increasingly involved in the economic development of this country in the past decade, unfortunately, their exploitation as a human resource has also increased.

The mobilisation of women for community action has improved since 1985. This can only be successful through the participation of women as autonomous individuals who combine to analyse their problems, make decisions, implement them and benefit from them.

While the grouping of women together is vital, it is also an absolute necessity for men to be involved in the mobilisation for action. Without their acknowledgement, support and contribution in implementing action, traditional structures will prevent any change occurring. The fact that from a cross section of people invited to the workshop only two men were present shows the difficulty in obtaining effective support from them. These 'women's' issues are not exclusive to women only, but effect all of society and how it functions.

So, even while the workshop was an excellent forum for women from every field to come together to share their expertise and experiences, and to express their concerns, it seemed to be a case of preaching to the converted. Let's hope that the enthusiasm, ideas and recommendations for equality and personal development will filter through to the rest. ♦

# Justice for women

A workshop on Economic Justice for Women by the World Council of Churches was held from 1-6th May in Kandy with 32 women participants from Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, representing women's groups, NGOs and church bodies.

Patriarchy and its institutionalisation by governments and religions was identified as a root cause of the unequal power relations between men and women. It was agreed that gender analysis is imperative in order to formulate and implement programs and actions that tackle issues such as: the feminisation of poverty; violence; the abuse of women's basic human rights, such as limited to no access to education, shelter, health as well as physical and psychological abuse.

Participants rejected the dominant development model as being gender neutral and disempowering as it assumes and imposes the parameters of development without taking into account the local needs and resources available for a sustainable society. In recognising their different cultural, political, economic and social backgrounds that result in a vast diversity of needs, the women also rejected the notion of a model

that presumes to homogenise them.

The following were identified as issues impacting in one form or another on all women:

At the global level - The unequal allocation of resources between North and South; the abuse of human rights as an instrument of control by the richer industrialised nations wanting to impose their interests on the poor nations; the discrimination and abuse of immigrants to do work that is poorly paid, and, the homogenisation of the world into the 'global village' which stifles diversity of experiences and does not acknowledge different cultures, traditions, languages and contexts.

At the regional level - Minimal information and communication among and between nations; erosion of the diverse, indigenous systems of agriculture by the use of unsustainable technology; the increase of sex trafficking across and within borders, where prostitution is seen as the only option for survival for many poor women, and, child labour for generating income for entire families and their vulnerability to sex tourism in the light of the AIDS crisis.

At the National level - Government policies that are not gender sensitive and hence do not acknowledge women's contributions; unequal allocation of resources and access to policy making structures by all citi-

zens; feminisation of poverty due to development policies that are not people-centred and which come from outside their reality and aren't sustainable; unstable political situations due to social and economic inequalities; civil strife; dislocation of people from their indigenous habitats to make way for 'development' projects which disrupt livelihoods, erode cultures and destroy communities.

In response to these issues, the participants formed Solidarity Amongst Asian Women (SAW), a network functioning as a focal point for the acquisition and dissemination of information across and within the region. Priorities of action by the group include:

a) identify, support and strengthen existing networks and movements of women working on issues of economic justice so as to have strong pressure groups to monitor and influence national and international policies and their

impact on women

- b) The need for conscientisation on the status of women through publications, public events, media, human rights campaigns including women's health, education, access to resources and participation in decision making processes.
- c) To sensitise people against militarisation and expose its links to the dominant economic paradigm.
- d) to encourage small, alternative models of development that take into account available resources and local needs.
- e) to work in collaboration with all women, irrespective of nationality, to cancel national debts.

The cross section of participants contributed to the success of the workshop, enriching dialogue and helping to facilitate an understanding of the complexities and diversities of each person's reality - "It was in this diversity of cultures, languages, ideologies, experiences and religions that we drew strength and unity as women." ♦

## Danielle

OUR Australian friend, Danielle Atkins from the Overseas Services Bureau, came to us late in '94 and worked with the Voice of Women till the end of the year '95. She is due to leave us very soon.

We would like to record our deep appreciation of her editorial work and her ability to create a friendly atmosphere all round at work and outside. Her contribution to the work of the organization was carried out with a sense of commitment. We hope she is able to carry back similar impressions of our work place and our country. ♦

## Sybil launches *Vaniyang Kalu*

*Vaniyang Kalu Vaniyang* by Sybil Wettasinghe, printed and published by Vishwakala Sarvodaya, was launched on 30th September amidst a big gathering.

This story is semi autobiographical dealing with the childhood of Sybil who is the Art Director of Voice of Women Poster Workshops.

Sybil has received many awards both here and abroad during her career including:

- 1965 Women's Council of England for "Vesak Lantern"
- 1982 Kuma Concours Picture Book Illustrators Competition
- 1986 Best Foreign Book award for "Kuda Hura"
- 1987 Most Popular Book in Japan award presented by the Tokyn Library Association also for Kuda Hura
- 1989 Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava Award for the Children's Bible
- 1995 Japan Cultural Ministry for "Heity the Fox"
- 1995 Education Ministry award for "Heity the Fox"
- 1995 French Award for Graphic Art for Heity the fox"



*Representatives of the Australian High Commission Ms Romant Thanblak and Ms Mulanet lighting the lamp at the ceremonial opening.*



*The three young artists - Chandani Senerath Yapa, Chandrika Perera and Amita Indrani*

### Exhibition

THREE young artists who show promise of going far, Chandani Senerath Yapa, Chandrika Perera, and Amita Indiranees held a three day art exhibition at the Lionel Wendt on 4th of September 1995.

After their successful exhibition, which was sponsored by the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka, the artists have been invited to hold exhibitions at Katubedda University and at Mirigama.

The three artists prepar-

ing to be professionals have joined the University of Aesthetics for a post graduate course.

Chandani Senerath Yapa received her initial training at the Poster Workshop and Painting course

conducted by the Voice of Women under Art Director of Kantha Handa, Sybil Wettasinghe and S.H. Srath.

### Ribbons for Beijing

JANAKI Samarathi Pathirage, a young artist trained at the Voice of Women Poster Workshop, participated on behalf of the organisation at the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) workshop for the Disabled held in Bangkok from June 22-30, 1995. The workshop stitched a very long ribbon for Beijing '95 made up of one metre long paintings, embroidery, sewing, patch work all done by the participants.

The painting on cloth by Janaki was "Much appreciated" she said.

The disabled women exhibited their products in Bangkok. There were bags, paintings, flowers, embroidery, crochet and knitting. At the close of the workshop, the disabled young trying to make a bright future for themselves danced and sang with some playing musical instruments.

## Post Beijing workshop

Voice of Women held a post Beijing workshop at S.L.A.S.S with the delegates who went to Beijing supported by SIDA.

The five delegates were Ramani Fernando (Lawyer, Voice Of Women); Eva Ranawera (Voice of Women); Chinta Balasooriya (Women In Need); Lilian Kariyawasam (Sarvodaya); and, Sr. Mary Immaculate. They presented topics including issues of the NGO Forum and UN World Conference, women and the media, feminism and legal aspects, violence against women and the position of women in the Sri Lankan context. The meeting was chaired by Sujatha Wijetilake.

Fifty grass root women participated in the workshop held at S.L.A.S.S, which was opened by Mr Johan Norqvist, Secretary SIDA.

Mr Norqvist was optimistic about life for women after Beijing. He said Ms Carolyn Hannan-Anderson, the Gender Advisor of SIDA who participated as part of the official Swedish delegation to the Conference in China, "was pleased with the outcome of the Conference and the document that was finally accepted. There were some positive changes taking place favouring more equality. The writing of sexual- and reproductive rights she felt were surprisingly good."

## Tears from Kuwait

'Tears From Kuwait' was a successful exhibition conducted by the weekly paper, Ravaya, at the Public Library on the 24th and 25th October, 1995. The exhibition showed over one hundred photographs of Sri Lankan migrant women in Kuwait who have been made destitute in a country which for most, if not all, was the only offering of hope for the future.

The exhibition highlighted the miserable conditions and the insecurity faced by our women who go in search of work outside the country. It calls for immediate remedial attention to reduce hardship and exploitation and safeguard the human rights of the women.

We are glad the the exhibition is going outstation to raise public awareness as well as make families realize how the money sent home is earned.

## Sexual harassment

"Sexual Harassment - Sharing of experiences and strategies between East and West" was the title of a two day seminar at the SLFI, conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung with guest facilitators, Mrs Babel Meschkutat and Mrs Monika Holzhecher from the Social Research Institute, Dortmund, Germany (both researchers have been working for a long time on sexual harassment and strategies against it in Germany and Europe and presented findings from their study on sexual harassment in the workplace in Germany).

The objectives of the seminar were to find a common definition of sexual harassment, to share experiences (Sri Lanka and Germany), and to develop strategies for awareness and action taking.

One of the difficulties in combating sexual harassment is that there is no absolute definition of what it is. Therefore, what the victim sees as offensive is mostly not taken seriously by perpetrators or by those in the position to take action against him. Another problem is the inability to prove many instances of sexual harassment especially when the harassment is a verbal proposition, or when the victim's only contact with the harasser is at the time of the incident.

Not only do they need to be supported by the law enforcers and unions for women to go to, there also needs to be a recognition by the 'everyday' person that sexual harassment is an offence and will not be tolerated. For all the instances that are ignored, victims and bystanders must speak out to protest the degradation of women by all sexual harassers.

Interestingly, the findings, attitudes and strategies to come from the German experience of sexual harassment are similar to those in the Sri Lankan context. This goes to support the notion that sexual harassment essentially has to do with the attitudes toward women and social conditioning about sex and gender roles.

## Awards ceremony

FOURTEEN trained artists from the Voice of Women Poster Workshops were awarded with certificates presented by Manel De Silva, Project Officer of UNDP - UNIFEM who funded the workshops, at the Voice of Women auditorium on 16th November 1995. Twenty women participated in two separate workshops over the past two years, with some now working professionally in their field. Also present at the presentation were course directors Sybil Wettasinghe and Charitha Dissanayake (who took over from S.H. Sarath when he left to go abroad).

January 1996 ♦ Voice of Women ♦ 29

## Two poems

By *Parvathy Arasanayagam*

### Search

She gathers firewood  
to feed the flames  
spread warmth in a  
cold, hungry room.

The children look  
up with hopeful  
glances at the  
woman called mother,  
bring food to  
ease the dull lingering  
abys between life  
and death.

Muddled, cracked,  
gnarled, the hands  
that clothe and feed  
the fires of hunger  
fill the plates of  
others and scrape the  
rice bowl for the last  
grains of rice.

### The Patriarch

Your eyes are mirrored orbs  
which search my inner being,  
search for a spark of femininity  
which for you would be a sign of humility,  
enhance your own reflective self worth.

But you are surprised,  
this picture that you see  
reflected in your own  
structured gaze of what  
one should be, butterfly  
or moth, plaything in a  
field of golden marigolds  
is evasive and escapes  
your stereotypical graph,  
she is an analytical being  
not to be exploited like  
the others who dance their  
way to death in sleazy bars  
or sip the wine of delusion  
as you gaze intrusive  
at your victim

The sun changes shades,  
women, mothers, people  
wives, seek other paths  
that define another option.



## Women's Health Status - Broad Indicators

INDICATORS of women's health status cannot be confined to data on physical health alone. With an understanding that access to good health is determined by social, cultural and economic conditions and the capacity of women to make their own decisions on their life, data needs to include Women's position in society and the economic resources allocated to health services. The table below shows this interrelationship.

Quantitative figures on health in terms of life expectancy and death (mortality) cannot indicate well-being. Women, for example, suffer physically and psychologically, due to abuse by their male partners.

Looking at the high-income countries of Japan and Australia in the table, this situation is obvious. Although women live to their eighties, outliving men, a large number of women are being abused by their male partners. On the other hand, in poorer countries like Papua New Guinea and Bangladesh, women live only to their fifties and many still die due to pregnancy and childbirth. On top of this situation, wife abuse is a common occurrence for many women in these countries.

Generally, Asian-Pacific countries, have had more success in increasing the percent-

ages of women and men using contraception than in lowering maternal mortality or improving women's access to formal education. Indonesia and Bangladesh are examples of countries with high maternal mortality despite moderate levels of contraceptive use. This reflects more resources allocation going to family planning programmes which has not necessarily had a direct correlation with improvement of women's health.

Maternal mortality is a critical component of women's health and most Asian-Pacific countries still have moderate to high rates, reflective of inadequate access to health services and low levels of education. These conditions, in turn, are related to the country's economic resources for development and low priority allocations are made. Defence expenditure is frequently higher than health, as shown in the above for selected countries. Sri Lanka stands out for its ability to lower maternal mortality, provide very good access to health services and promote women's education even though it has a low income economy. This shows how essential political will is in concrete commitments to improve women's total health needs and the related conditions of their life. ♦



### Women's Health and Social, Cultural and Economic Conditions Selected Countries

	Life Expectancy W/M* (1990-95)	Maternal Mortality per 100,000* (1990)	Contraceptive Prevalence <sup>1</sup> (1980-93) %	Access to Health Services <sup>1</sup> (1985-93)%	Females per 100 Males Enrolled in Second Level <sup>1</sup> (1990)	Prevalence of Wife Abuse <sup>2</sup> (1990-93)%
<i>Developing</i>						
Bangladesh	53/53	480	40	45	50	**
China	73/69	95	83	90	73	**
India	61/60	200-300	43	85	52	22
Indonesia	65/61	450	50	80	61	**
Malaysia	73/69	20	48	**	102	39
Pakistan	59/59	400	12	55	41	**
Papua New Guinea	57/55	700	4	96	61	67 (total women)
Sri Lanka	74/70	60	62	95*	W/governmental	60
<i>Industrialised</i>						
Australia	80/74	5	76	**	99	50
Japan	82/76	10	64	**	97	59

Symbol Explanation:

\*\* Data not available \* Differs from the standard definition



## Cervical cancer

THE second most deadly cancer to kill Sri Lankan women is one that is totally preventable.

Cancer of the cervix is located in the neck of the womb with the most common type being squamous carcinoma found in women in their 40s and 50s. In younger women a different type of cell is affected identified as adenocarcinoma.

In its early stages cervical cancer can be detected and treated before it claims its victim. By having routine pap smears doctors can intervene if any cell change is identified before it spreads.

A pap smear is an extremely fast, painless and non-invasive test that can detect changes in cells at the initial stage of the cancer by obtaining a swab from the patient's cervix. Pap smears should and must be done every two years for sexually active women and all women over 30 years.

Other signs that could be symptoms that cervical cancer is present in its early stages are post coital bleeding and the presence of a watery vaginal discharge. In its more established stages clinical features also include bleeding in between the monthly period.

Fortunately, cancerous cells in the cervix do not grow quickly. It gradually progresses in four stages: during Stage 0 histological changes in the cervix occur; during Stage 1 the cancer is limited to the cervix; and, during Stages 2, 3 and 4 the cancer becomes invasive to other parts of the body.

Treatment for cervical cancer can either be surgery or use of radiotherapy. In Stage 0 a simple hysterectomy can be performed, with a more complex one (Wertheim's hysterectomy) used if the cancer has developed into Stage 1. Past Stage 1 surgery is not effective, and instead radiotherapy is used to kill the cancerous cells.

The cause of cervical cancer is not definitely known; however, theories suggest that seminal fluid in males may be a contributing factor, as well as the early age of sexual activity before the woman has fully developed. While childbirth has not been proved as producing the cancer, pregnancy can cause it to spread.

But, all of this can be prevented! Don't become an unnecessary victim of cervical cancer and contact the Cancer Society, your local GP, general hospital or health clinic to find out where you can have a pap smear. ♦

## NEWS

### Conference head calls for action-oriented platform

by Xu Yang

THE Fourth World Conference on Women should adopt a workable, 21st-century oriented Platform for Action to promote the women's movement in all countries, president of the conference head of the Chinese official delegation Chen Muhua said.

Only such an action-oriented document can satisfy the strong craving of women for equality, development and peace, Chen said.

Chen, who is also chairperson of the All-China Women's Federation, was elected president of the conference at the opening ceremony on September 4.

She cited poverty and lack of education as the biggest obstacles to women's advancement.

"Helping women shake off poverty and receive education are basic human rights and the precondition of women's participation in development," she pointed out.

"We ask for equality between men and women, opportunities to fully enjoy the rights of survival, development and participation; we ask for peace to protect women and children from wars," she said. ♦





# voice of women

## First Day

Colours like an artist's palette  
Clustered against counters to  
Purchase anything to eat ...  
Strange names or no,  
Hunger knows no prejudice,  
Thirst no discrimination.  
Stomachs have no eyes,  
And tasting tongues  
Can tell no lies.  
This feast a banquet  
For my eyes seeing  
Sister after sister  
Rainbow decked  
And hued,  
All of us on a simple quest  
For food.

Marion



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