

Introduction

This publication presents a selection of the papers which were given at the professional interdisciplinary seminars which were part of the International Federation of University Women Conference in Yokohama in 1995. Other papers have been published elsewhere.¹ The editors have not been able to include all the papers presented in Yokohama, but hope the present selection will provide an overview of the diversity of work done by IFUW members throughout the world. They are only drops in the ocean of poverty and distress which surrounds us, but hopefully these drops may lead to a greater flow of forceful powers to counteract the negative downside of much contemporary multinationalism, global economics, and consequent violations of human rights.

The papers presented here outline some of the major challenges which face society in protecting women's rights and in promoting the equal participation of women in society, aspects which are widely acknowledged as necessary conditions for democracy. This collection of papers reflects the content of some of the ten seminars which provided opportunities for participants from 52 countries to share information about, and to consider some of the possible solutions to the problems facing women in the 1990s. It is not surprising that the potential of education to provide answers to questions, to offer solutions for problems and to act as a catalyst for change is a recurrent theme. The Conference in Yokohama took place in August enabling the results of five of the seminars to be also presented at the NGO FORUM at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Huiarou, Beijing: Women and Poverty, The Nutritional Susceptibility of Women, Women and the University Curriculum, Violence in Human Relations, and A Multi-Religious Perspective on Girlhood and Education.

The International Federation of University Women has affiliates in sixty-seven countries world-wide. IFUW members are university graduates who work in a variety of different fields, and their interdisciplinary interests in women's issues are not necessarily linked directly to their professional commitments. The promotion of understanding and friendship between university women is among the aims of this NGO, and the Interdisciplinary seminars constitute a means of realising these twin objectives. Inclusiveness, collegiality and collaboration are key features of these seminars which provide opportunities for members from widely different cultural and intellectual backgrounds to exchange ideas and experiences, to receive affirmation and sometimes confrontation, and to address matters of common interest. Papers were presented with an international and multi-disciplinary audience in mind.

The 1992 IFUW conference in Stanford, USA, marked the beginning of the Study and Action Programme "Women's Future, World Future: Education for Survival and Progress". This programme emphasised the importance of education as the key to progress for women and girls. Without that, they are unable to participate in the decision-making process locally, nationally or globally. It is imperative that the situation of those whose participation in society is inhibited as a result of illiteracy, 60% of whom are women, be addressed urgently. In addition it has been pointed out by the World Bank and other forces behind the market-economy of our times, that the return on investment in the education of women and girls is greater than that of almost any other investment. It was natural for us as an organisation to highlight where the problems lie and suggest possible answers.

One of the major focuses of the Study and Action programme for the triennium leading up to Yokohama was on the girl child and her plight and possibilities in the

¹ *Women and the Peace Process*, JAUW, 1996; *Women and Higher Education*, JAUW, 1995/6; and *Women and the University Curriculum: towards democracy, peace and equality*. UNESCO/IFUW, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 1996.

world today. The themes dealt with here, particularly those describing conditions facing the girl child in Third World countries, but also those on violence and on economic development, make demands on our ingenuity and challenge us to devise methods of changing long-established, pervasive and entrenched social patterns and institutions. They also remind us that we need to influence the political will so that situations of injustice, which operate to the detriment of women and of men, will cease to be tolerated. This programme has been seen as so vital for the world's women that the 1995-8 programme is continuing the theme but this time with emphasis on these issues in relation to the adolescent girl.

Political correctness today requires acknowledgement of the link between the world's future and women's future. It has become more and more obvious that unless the position of women is improved globally the expected benefits of structural adjustment programmes will not materialize. An approach to economic gain which defines it in a narrow sense lacks a human face, and needs to be widened to take account of its social context and its impact on human beings. This point was underscored heavily at the 6th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women which was held in Adelaide, Australia in April 1996. Many of the plenary sessions highlighted the debilitating effects of global restructuring and multinational companies on women especially in Third World countries. As a counteractive measure an association of feminist economists has been formed with a view to bringing to the surface the particular effects of global economy on women, and to encouraging research and the dissemination of research on the gender and social aspects of the world economic situation. This gives hope for the future.

The editors are aware that the inclusion of the litany of factors which militate against the girl child, cited in many papers, may appear repetitious to some readers. However, we believe that the very consistency with which these factors are mentioned by contributors from countries which are very different in geographical and socio-cultural terms, constitutes a powerful argument in favour of global policies and strategies to support national and local initiatives in favour of the Girl Child. The style of papers ranges from those which largely concentrate on governmental policy documents and aspirational statements, to those which present a rigorous analysis and critique of performance, or a specific project, often highlighting the gap between 'Policy in Intent', and 'Policy in Practice.'

The seminar on *The Impact of the World Economic Situation on Women* had as its aim to highlight how women are the losers in the global exploitation of economic resources which is taking place today. In some countries women are deprived of the basic resources which have enabled them to keep starvation from the door, as the local ecological environment is destroyed in the chase for short term monetary gain. This local environment is often also the place for social meetings. Structural adjustment programmes thus not only destroy the local environment and cause ecological harm, but also disrupt social patterns of communication in local communities. The time spent today in meeting basic survival needs such as gathering fuel, provision of food, etc. leaves more and more children to their own devices, or to the care of other children who are not able to provide the necessary mental stimulation needed by a young child.

Susanne Jalbert's article illustrates the potentialities which women have, if their self-esteem and belief in their own resources are encouraged. The paper by Dorothy Meyer from New Zealand, a country which has been praised by the World Bank for its highly successful economic restructuring programme, discusses the effects of this programme on women. It shows how negative restructuring programmes can be for low income and ethnic minority groups even in so-called First World countries. The résumé of Catherine Mas' doctoral work on sustainable development and food strategies highlights how we need to act, if we are to attain a state of sustainable food

security, and stresses the necessity for a multidisciplinary approach to this issue. Tracy Sichinga examines the effects of a Structural Adjustment Programme in Zambia, and suggests forms of intervention that may bring about change. Thelma Henderson gives the results of a project on rural women undertaken by the Centre for Social Development of Rhodes University, South Africa. Though abbreviated here, it gives a very full picture of the situation for many women in South Africa, and of the possibilities of doing something about their situation. Birten Gökyay describes the situation in Turkey, where equality for women has been on the agenda for a relatively long time, with programmes run in co-operation with the World Bank to incorporate women in all walks of life. However, theory and practice do not entirely coincide.

Equal access to education at all levels world-wide has long been an objective for women's organisations. However, insufficient emphasis has been laid on the necessary social environment and understanding for this goal to be achieved. Education offers an important escape route from poverty, whether in a developed or developing country. The global centralisation of education, reducing the number of small classes, and forcing even small children to travel long distances to school, is negative for all children, but especially so for girls in countries where economic, religious and cultural criteria make parents afraid to let their girls travel far from home without supervision. That poverty is one of the greatest hindrances to education for all, is clearly revealed in the papers on *Poverty and the Girl Child*. The editors regret the concentration of these papers on the Third World, as poverty is pervasive also in developed countries. When newspaper reports state that 30% of the young children in Liverpool, England, live below the poverty line, and other research findings indicate that in the USA the percentage of poor is higher among men than women, it is time to focus not just on this as a Third World problem but as an increasingly global one.

Leah Wanjama takes up the question of relativity in relation to definitions of what it means to be poor. This is an important aspect of the feminization of poverty which requires much more attention. Anne Touwen outlines a project which examined the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes in Zambia on women's four major roles in society, the productive, the reproductive, the caring, and the social and political role. In this way the paper embraces a wider perspective than that of Sichinga. This point was also touched on in several other seminar papers albeit the major focus of these papers was different. The dependence of parents in many parts of the world on children to provide for them in their old age is another feature of poverty and economics. As long as girls are not considered as equal wage earners this situation will continue. Sushil Bhardwaj describes graphically the disastrous results of such cultural norms and economic pressure today. The title of a paper given at the conference but not included here, "The African Girl Child: nursemaid, farmer, mother - but never child?" in many ways sums up the situation for the girl child in many parts of the world.

The seminar on *The Nutritional Susceptibility of Girls and Women* took up other aspects of life affected by poverty. In the light of the work done by the Dunn Nutrition Group in Keneba, The Gambia since 1974, the paper presented by Elizabeth Poskitt indicates the catastrophic effects of malnutrition and diet on girls and women.

An education which fails to provide the individual with the means of understanding other people may be considered a contributory factor to the genesis of violence in society. The papers given in the seminar on *Violence in Human Relations* illustrate how some widely divergent violent situations impact on human society. If a meaningful response is to be made to violence, situations need to be examined in depth and possible contributory factors identified. The themes discussed range from the intra-psychic to the socio-political. Grace Tima reminds us that the topic of discrimination against women has been on the political agenda of the United Nations for almost twenty years, and that mechanisms exist which should be utilised to

promote women's full participation in society. Recognising Human Rights as the foundation stone, and using examples, extensively, but not exclusively, of practices in the Cameroon, the author discusses a wide range of social and cultural factors which operate from before birth and throughout the life cycle and which militate against women and girls enjoying human rights. Remedies are suggested which include women's political participation and access to, and participation in, education. Judith Issroff presents the perspective of a practising psychiatrist on violence and its effects. Her penetrating analysis, which links intra-psychic and social processes, reminds us that we all have trigger points which can release our inhibitions regarding violent behaviour. She explains how through educational group processes predilections regarding violence can be modified. We are encouraged to avail ourselves of the cultural containers in our shared external reality, by means of which feelings about competitiveness and territoriality can be expressed safely. To those listed by the author, we take the liberty of adding sport. There are several parallels in Issroff's work to the programme *Passages* which is outlined by Jeanne Cassell as a way of counteracting violence. These two papers suggest ways of dealing with this dominant social problem of today.

Many of the papers in this book focus, appropriately, on childhood as a critical period. Elizabeth Horkan's discussion on elder abuse reminds us that the possibility of experiencing violence persists throughout the life cycle. Based on data from twenty-two European countries, the paper examines some of the conditions and factors which a Council of Europe Study Group identified as being associated with violence against elderly people. A range of educational interventions aimed at challenging society's ageist attitudes, empowering older people, and improving the social and health care service response to victims and to those at risk of abuse is presented.

The global power of the media is an issue of growing concern, and it is vital that women are participators in making media presentations. Recognising the power of imagery to influence attitudes and opinions, the papers in the seminar on *Women and the Media* attempted to throw some light on aspects of this situation and propose some alternative strategies. We have, therefore, chosen to include one of the papers from this seminar as an example highlighting some of the key issues involved. It is not enough, as Lorraine Thomson shows, to employ women. They have to be given the chance to make the news their way.

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