

LAST CHANCE FOR THE NAIROBI WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Less than two weeks from now, on July 15 in Nairobi, Kenya, the U.N. Decade for Women is to be capped by a twelve-day international conference. Its avowed purposes are to sum up ten years of activities in focusing worldwide attention on the role and status of women, and to formulate a Forward Looking Strategy projected to the year 2000. Like its two predecessor conferences--Mexico City 1975 and Copenhagen 1980--Nairobi threatens to end in chaos. The culprits: radicals within the Third World bloc (the so-called Group of 77 or G-77) abetted by the Soviets and their surrogates. The chief obstacle to a rational approach to the genuine agenda of women's concerns is Soviet and G-77 insistence on injecting into the Nairobi Conference the ritualistic political issues--vicious attacks on Israel, the U.S., South Africa, and transnational corporations--that regularly stymie productive debate in the U.N. General Assembly and other U.N. bodies.

On June 20, at a special U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) session in New York, a U.S. proposal to adopt the rule of consensus at Nairobi was derailed by a vote of 37-2, with 12 abstentions. Only Iceland stood with the U.S. All other Western nations abjectly abstained. (Israel is not a member of ECOSOC.) The attack on the U.S. proposal was led by such presumed U.S. friends as Egypt and Mexico, with strong support from Algeria, Brazil, and India, along with the Soviets.

This rule of consensus is not some dry, legalistic formula. By forcing the conference participants to stick to areas of agreement and affirmative recommendations--the substance of consensus, that is to say--this rule would have given the U.S. delegation the essential leverage to head off such radical proposals as the equation of Zionism and racism, which surfaced at the Mexico City Decade of Women Conference in 1975 (when the consensus rule was not used) and which the Soviets promise to force onto the Nairobi agenda. If the G-77 refused to scale down its rhetoric and stick to business, the U.S., under the consensus rule, could block agreement on what the G-77 most wants, the Forward Looking Strategy. The U.S. delegation even offered to permit virtually unlimited debate of highly-charged political issues and voting on supplemental resolutions, separate from the consensus conference report. This was to no avail.

WHERE DOES THE U.S. GO FROM HERE?

A previous Heritage Foundation study reviewed the dreary record of the road from Mexico City to Nairobi.¹ Throughout the spring, the U.S. mounted an intensive effort to make it possible for Nairobi to be a success. But this effort failed, despite constant assurances of solidarity from key Western allies. Of 372 paragraphs in the draft conference document, 77 remain in deadlock--including virtually every issue of substance.

There is one remaining opportunity to turn around the situation. President Reagan is under congressional mandate (P.L. 98-164, initiated by Senator Nancy Kassebaum) to report prior to the conference on the U.S. role in Nairobi. Last August he urged nations not to politicize the Women's Conference; if they did so, he warned sternly, the U.S. would withdraw. He should renew this warning now. He also should instruct the U.S. delegation to push hard in Nairobi for adoption of the consensus rule on the Forward Looking Strategy, to reiterate its willingness to debate in good faith all issues germane to the legitimate concerns of women, and even to permit up-and-down votes on divisive supplemental resolutions. Failing all this, the U.S. delegation should be instructed to withdraw prior to a vote on the Forward Looking Strategy. Otherwise it will find itself voting on a document crafted by the most radical members of the Group of 77.

The United States must not be party to the cynical radical tactic of holding women's concerns hostage to the political warfare endemic within the U.N. system. At Nairobi, a clear and unambiguous line must be drawn.

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1. Greerson G. McMullen and Charles M. Lichenstein, "A U.S. Policy for The U.N. Conference on Women," Heritage Foundation Background No. 410, February 25, 1985.