

Seminar on Women and Development in Africa

by Lynne Wanyeki

The African Student Union (ASU) hosted a seminar on Women and Development in Africa recently. The seminar, which went on throughout the afternoon consisted of three talks, a film presentation and five panel discussions.

The first speaker was Ms. Orié Rogo-Manduli, a Kenyan who is now a full-time student at Mt. St. Vincent in Halifax. She spoke on the topic of *General Development Issues*.

Ms. Rogo-Manduli first presented the context in which woman work and live in Africa. Women are seen, and see themselves as "Everything to everyone". They are the food-producers, the nurturers and the managers of their households.

From this perspective, she then spoke of women in agriculture. She warned of displacing women from farming. "As women are displaced from farming, children will increasingly go hungry. Men's priority is with the large-scale, farming of cash-crops for sale overseas."

Women were presented as being responsible for the future of African society itself by virtue of their raising of children. Saying that "Children are a woman's insurance in the absence of social welfare insurance programs", Ms. Rogo-Manduli still placed emphasis on women's health issues.

"Women do not tend to seek health care for themselves as are so many pressing things to look after at home". Tied into health care is child-rearing. She denounced the social conditions that left women under-educated and financially unable to take control of their reproductive abilities. African women do not tend to make use of family-planning clinics as "Birth-control is still a taboo subject. Children are seen as an important criteria for status and wealth".

The solution seems to be education. Ms. Rogo-Manduli pointed out that as yet, African women are poorly-educated. For when a family is short of cash, men have the priority in schooling ... After all, it is believed that women will get married, but the men will have to take over as providers of the household."

At this point, it was noted from the audience that this reflects more on the influence of colonialism than on the values of African men. For in African society, there are three phases which must be taken into account.

In pre-colonial Africa, both women and men were educated equally in the traditional ways. In missionary and colonial Africa, with the imposition of a European system of education, the emphasis was placed on the education of men. Men, by the imposed values of colonial powers, became the

breadwinners, and African society was effectively stratified.

Now, in post-colonial Africa, it is increasingly recognized that the education of women is fundamental to the development of Africa.

Ms. Rogo-Manduli ended her speech with a plea to Africans studying here. "Do not complain about the situation at home ... Go home and develop your country! And remember, African women are profound. Be proud to be an African woman!"

The next speaker was Ms. Lubanga, a South African who is currently the Director of Health Services with the Talbot Perkins Children's Services in New York. She spoke on *Health Issues*, specifically as these relate to the apartheid system.

Black women are "the most economically deprived group" in South Africa. "This poverty reflects directly on health issues."

Although President DeKlerk has initiated a series of reforms, including the proposed abolishment of all apartheid laws, these reforms have not been substantiated with a real improvement in the living conditions of all stratified and socially excluded groups.

Ms. Lubanga stated that "As it is almost impossible for Blacks to rise above the poverty-level, Black women are forced to deal daily with the health hazards of sub-standard living and working conditions".

Ms. Lubanga further pointed out the statistics highlighting the abnormally high rates of infant mortality, illegal abortion, septic infection, etc. facing Black women in South Africa. She emphasized the absurdity of these statistics in view of the fact that "South Africa is not a so-called Third World country. It is a wealthy, developed country where these statistics should not be occurring."

She concluded by denouncing the apartheid system under which "black women have unequal access to any kind of health services."

The final speaker was Dr. Ragaven, from Concordia University. He is the head of the African National Congress in Quebec, and has been in exile from South Africa for 23 years. He is also a fellow of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute and has studied at both Oxford and Cambridge. Dr. Ragaven spoke on *Political Issues*.

Dr. Ragaven first stated his view of universities as "The think-tanks of the oppressors, from which all social, political, and economic policies are generated." He then elaborated on this by noting the deficiencies of these universities, which advocate the studying of structures, institutions and theories in isolation. He commented that

women, specifically Black feminists were the first to unveil this deficiency, and to probe behind these structures to find the real power sources. "Black feminists were the first to articulate their experience and challenge the accepted epistemology which caters to white, male-dominated power-structures".

"The mechanics of oppression have to do with linear thinking. Rationality has been marked in the Western world by hypocrisy: hypocrisy in vocabulary (eg. the very implication of the word "development" as meaning "Westernized", "industrialized"); and hypocrisy in strategy.

It is the rationality of "hypocrisy in strategy" which allows for systemic discrimination. It is "hypocrisy in strategy" which allowed Joe Clark to declare that Canada was completely committed to economic sanctions for South Africa in 1984, while actual trade between Canada and South Africa was allowed to increase by 64% over the next 5 years."

It is the rationality of "hypocrisy in strategy" which has created this entire "Third World" international debt. Dr.

Ragaven stated that "to claim that Africa owes such enormous funds back to the West is absolutely ridiculous if we look back to the historical and systematic expropriation of people and resources from Africa."

He made the analogy between the African international debt situation and the land-claims of the indigenous peoples of Canada's First Nations to illustrate this point.

Dr. Ragaven concluded by stating that "Any talk of 'development' in Africa must initially deal with this type of destabilization which actually is nothing more than the maintenance of the status-quo." He added that "In this capacity, women, Black feminists, have a large role to play."

After the three speakers, there was a film presentation of *You Hit a Woman, You Hit a Rock*. The film documented South African women's initiation of the passive resistance movement against the pass-book laws. South Africa is unique in that the women involved in the struggle against apartheid have actually articulated their goals in the context of a Women's Movement.

"Do not complain about the situation at home. Go home and develop your country. Be proud to be an African woman!"

- Rogo-Manduli

Following the film, the seminar divided into 5 Panel Discussions. Prof. Boxill (UNB English Dept.), Prof. Brown (UNB French Dept.), and Gertrude Edem chaired the Panel on *Literature*. Prof. Ragaven (Concordia Sociology/Political Science Dept.) chaired the Panel on *Politics*, while Prof. Sears (UNB Education Dept.) chaired the Panel on *Education*. Ms. Lubanga chaired the Panel on *Health*, and finally, Ms. Rogo-Manduli chaired the Panel on *Economics*.

The seminar was very well attended and Ms. Munda, the Organizer from the ASU comments that "It passed on the message that it was intended to pass on, and I'm happy that so many people from the Fredericton community showed up."

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