COMMENTARY/CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT

From April 27 to May 1, 2000, South African women and African American women converged at a conference organized by the Global Women’s History Project (GWHP) at Westfield State College. The intent of the conference was to provide an opportunity for South African and African American women to discuss challenges they face in their respective communities and countries, to raise public awareness of these issues, and to forge links among the delegates.

Delegates to the Global Women’s History Conferences are all engaged in activism addressing a range of issues. They deliver papers that theorize their activism, with consideration of how the issues raised can be constructively addressed. The Conference discussed here was organized under the following themes: Community Health Initiatives; Domestic Violence; Domestic Servitude/Empowerment and Ideology; and Women’s Activism in Labor Unions.

Why a Dialogue Between the Two Groups?
South African women and African American women, respectively, emerge out of well-documented systems of bondage, i.e. apartheid, enslavement, and Jim Crow laws. Both groups engaged in the struggle against these systems, and continue to struggle against their long-term effects, both physical and psychological. It is well known that for women who have participated in political and social movements that brought an oppressive system to an end, a new struggle begins when they are “allowed” to participate fully in a newly emerging political and social structure.

In terms of the struggles faced, the two groups mirror each other, with African American women having more experience in what it means to gain “freedom.” Women from both regions spoke forcefully of the realities of poverty, ill-health, illiteracy, and political, social, and economic disempowerment plaguing both urban and rural women. They decried myths, romanticisms, and lies of white power structures in both regions regarding who African and African American women are.

The following is an overview of the conference organization and themes, and a review of select issues raised first by African American delegates, and then by South African delegates. The African American delegates were: Brenda Stokeley, President of Local 215, Social Service Employees, New York; Dora Robinson, Director, Martin Luther King Center, Springfield, Massachusetts; Safiya Bendele, Director of the Center for Women’s Development at Medgar Evers College, City University of New York; Judith Rollins, author and professor, Wellesley College; and Pamela Brooks, activist and historian. The South African delegates were: Roslyn Ivlathuray, Director of the Democracy Development Program (DDP), which focuses on women’s empowerment; Sindiwe Ivlagona, an activist writer; Thandi Ngubane, a community health nurse; Nonhlanhla Jordan, a lecturer in sociology; and Christine Motlalepule of Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT).

Discussion Themes: African American Delegates “New Vision, Fresh Inspiration, Revived Hope”
“I hope that this is the beginning of a long collaborative relationship between GWHP and the Women’s Empowerment Program that I am responsible for in South Africa...[and] that this is the start of a long collaborative relationship between the project that I run and the powerful and dynamic women that I have been connected to in the last few days.”
The speeches and discussion sessions over the past few days have truly inspired and motivated me. When asked at the retreat what did I most hope to gain from this conference my answer was new vision, fresh inspiration and revived hope to take on the challenges we face in South Africa...“ —Roslyn Mathuray

“This conference helped to explode the myth that we have achieved freedom here. And to explode the stereotype of the strong Black woman. We were able at this conference to be all of who we are. We need to be connected, not through identity politics, but through political activism and history. What is our role from here?”
—Brenda Stokeley

These quotations reflect critical themes that emerged at the conference: falling away of communication between regions after political goals are achieved; the empowerment of women through connecting to activism; fragmentation (resulting from apartheid and segregation); the importance of knowing one another’s histories not as they are taught to us but as they are lived by women; and the need to disseminate information. Has post-1994 represented the end of racist colonialism in South Africa? For some activists this marker may have been a reason to declare victory and move on; but, for most, the realization that another phase of colonialism in the form of economic globalization has emerged, coupled with the legacy of hundreds of years of oppression culminating in apartheid, only raises new questions about how to continue the struggle.

As noted, here in the United States African American women have a similar legacy to overcome, and similarly struggle with ongoing poverty and other forms of life-threatening disempowerment. And the effects of a globalized economy dominated by multinational corporations, partnered with the military and prison industrial complex, are daunting for most African American women. These women continue to struggle for human rights in health care, education, and housing; face class divisions that often polarize their communities; and face a conservative administration in 2002 that supports and fosters “modern” forms of slavery such as prison labor and welfare reform.
“We don’t need entitlement programs...”

Dora Robinson cited the preamble of the Declaration of Human Rights in her talk asserting that rights should not be privileges that can be taken away. “We don’t want and we don’t need ‘entitlement programs,’” she noted. “We need laws, we need institutions and systems and agencies and organizations and a justice system that really ensures entitlements to basic, basic things, like quality of life, housing, healthcare, adequate employment, education, clean air...those should be basic entitlements, and not privileges.” Dora forcefully encouraged her audience to become actively involved in a “change effort.” “You have to act, and act, and act.” Dora’s work at the King Center is all-encompassing, providing services that are denied by the State to her community, and engaging in ongoing advocacy.

“Unless you’re a Native American, all of you are immigrants...”

Brenda Stokeley, whose powerful activism in the Labor Movement has its roots in a long history of commitment to the struggle, appealed to the young people to pick up the burden and help make society “live up to what it’s supposed to be and help this world live up to what it’s supposed to be.” Brenda underscored Dora’s assertion that there has not been fundamental change in this country, “so that...basic human rights...are things that everyone experiences equally.” Brenda called for the majority of the people—the workers—to take control of government and decision-making “in terms of what is in the best interests of the majority of the people, whether we’re talking about in South Africa, or we’re talking about right here in Westfield, or we’re talking about Congress in the United States.” She spoke forcefully of the brutalization of workers who fought for their rights: “We’re talking about women in the South who are working in poultry plants, losing hands and limbs, who can’t even go to the bathroom
without asking permission... We're also talking about the immigrant worker, who many onus would wish disappeared, but unless you're a Native American, all of you are immigrants... These people are working where there are no bathroom facilities, where their children are working alongside them and cannot go to school. Where there are no health facilities. And the money that they eke out is not enough for them to live. Most of them are not allowed to even learn how to read. If anybody knows about slavery, this sounds very, very much like slavery.” Calling for all workers to be unionized, and for an independent party in this country that does not represent the rich, Brenda inspired courage, laughter, and tears from her audience and the increasingly stark recognition of the commonalities of struggle between the delegates from both regions.

“Place” Organizing
Safiya Bendele inspired us with her vision of “place organizing”: “we need to organize where we are, right at that place, at that University, or it could be residential, on the block where we live... it makes sense, because then the barriers automatically fall away, because the person you’re organizing with is your neighbor....” At the Medgar Evers Center and Black Women’s Cross-Cultural Center, Safiya and her co-workers have been developing a radical model for change, traveling around the world, convening women, and witnessing what is really happening to women on the streets, in rural areas—”and it’s the same all over the globe.” “If you look at the status of women and children planet-wide, you can see the tentacles and the direct hand of patriarchy.” Safiya moved us to confront the injustice and criminality of the so-called justice system in the U.S.: “In New York State, there’s 70,000 men in prison. Seven-o. Of that number, about 60,000 are Black and Latino. Now I’m sorry, Black and Latino men do not have criminal genes. Something else accounts for the skewed numbers in terms of incarceration. Likewise, in New York State, there are 5,000 women in prison. Of that number, 4,000 are Black and Latina. Again, what’s happening?”

Domestic Workers: “...and also growing is the appalling trade in domestic servants”

Judith Rollins decried the use of women as a cheap source of labor in the global capitalist system. Rollins has researched the plight of domestic workers in the U.S. and throughout the globe, focusing on Latin America. She noted: “And also growing is the appalling trade in domestic servants from Southeast Asia into other parts of Asia, and into the Middle East.... This trade is particularly appalling because it is run by the governments themselves. The receiving governments, of course, want to have cheap labor; the sending governments want to receive the remittances from their overseas workers.... And it’s also appalling because of the working conditions of these women, the emotional abuse, the very often sexual abuse, and the physical abuse that so many of them are subjected to.” In a detailed and illuminating analysis of the meaning and practices associated with domestic work, Rollins showed how the allocation of domestic work to certain categories of people historically reinforces class, race, and gender hierarchy from which employers benefit. Rollins called for federal legislation for programs that would move domestic workers into other occupations, and for innovative ways of industrializing housework.

“About Oppression, I learned from them...”
Parallels between experiences of black South African women and African American women in all of the areas addressed above clarified the need for joint strategies for change. Each presentation sharpened our vision as women’s analyses overlapped and fed into one another. These links were made explicit in the area of resistance by Pam Brooks in her presentation: “About Oppression, I Learned From Them: 1950S Black Women Activists Remember, From Blackbelt Alabama and Rural South Africa.” In a lyrical and poignant piece, Pam retold those stories that are hidden from history, making clear “that quite extraordinary women whose participation in leadership of their respective movements led to a substantial transformation in the political landscape and personal lives of black people and communities caught in the iron web of white domination.” Calling forth the high spirit of resistance that kept families and communities together and vital, Pam ended the conference presentations on a resounding note, affirming the many parallels marking the history of resistance of South African and African American
Discussion Themes: South African Delegates
Some of the central themes addressed and analyzed by the South African delegates at the conference were: the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a vehicle for promoting healing after apartheid, and also for promoting unity among and between all races within South Africa; women’s activism in health, particularly in the face of the AIDS epidemic; the role of rural women; and domestic violence.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission
Sindiwe Magona presented on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (mc) and its impact on women. The TRC was formed in 1995 to promote reconciliation and national unity. To achieve that goal the TRC was to probe human rights abuses committed by all political parties in the course of the struggle against apartheid. The TRC served as a judicial mechanism empowered to grant amnesty to felons, in exchange for full disclosure of facts associated with political objectives.

Sindiwe noted that while the TRC achieved some success, it also had limitations. It was successful in providing a forum in which information about what exactly happened was revealed to family members of individuals who were killed by the apartheid regime. But two limitations were noted: the scope of the TRC and the period of time addressed.

By definition, the TRC had to investigate only cases of gross human rights violations, meaning only cases of murder, not all human rights abuses. While Sindiwe recognized that murder was the ultimate human rights abuse, she spoke about problems not addressed by the TRC, but which nevertheless curtail the development of human beings to their fullest potential: high illiteracy rates, high infant mortality rates, poor wages, lack of property rights, the separation of families because of Section io Pass Laws, and many other laws enacted under apartheid.

The other limitation of the TRC was the period of time addressed. The focus was on violations of human rights covering March 1, 1960 to December 5, 1993, thirty-three years, nine months, and four days. The TRC could not address the violations of human rights that had taken place over the three hundred years of oppression under Apartheid.

Women’s Health in South Africa: “We wish there would be...”

Thandi Ngubane, a community health nurse in rural KwaZulu Natal, addressed the topic of women’s health in South Africa, focusing on the AIDS epidemic. She linked the migrant labor system instituted under apartheid directly to poverty and health problems faced primarily by women in the rural areas. The migrant labor system emerged in the days of the discovery of diamonds and gold and created a need for cheap labor. Since Africans were traditionally hunters and gatherers or subsistence farmers, they were not keen to leave their land and work in the mines. It therefore became necessary to coerce males to leave. One method of coercion was Pass Laws instituted by the apartheid regime. African males sixteen years and older had to carry passes, which restricted their movements. They also had to pay a yearly poll tax in cash. The need for cash thus forced most to look for formal employment in the mines located in urban areas, or to work on white-owned farms. In addition, the misappropriation of arable land belonging to Africans, which left them with only arid land for their subsistence, forced most males to seek paid employment in order to make a living.

Since men had been coerced to sell their labor in the mines, rural women became de facto heads of household, left to subsist on the remaining arid land. Most females were also involved in polygamous marriages to absentee husbands who could only visit once a year, impregnate them, and return to their mining jobs and urban mistresses. Such conditions created poverty and chronic diseases including HIV/
Despite the challenges described in her presentation, community health-care providers continue their work, and Thandi cited a “wish list” that health workers carry around their necks:

- We wish there would be halfway houses for street children.
- We wish there would be orphanages for AIDS orphans.
- We wish there would be more literacy training.
- We wish for the establishment of child rearing classes.
- We wish there would be support for depressed adults and children.
- We wish there would be more training for community counselors and caregivers.
- We wish there would be community work groups for reconstruction and development in rural areas.

Sharing Ideas and Networking, Rural to Urban! Urban to Rural
Nonhlanhla Jordan described her work with rural women around the Umtata area, Transkei. Transkei is a former homeland, one of the areas carved out for Africans by the apartheid regime in order to disenfranchise them, and also to keep “the less productive” Africans out of larger South Africa. Like most former homelands, the Transkei is populated mostly by women and children, and men who cannot be part of the migrant labor system.

Former homelands in rural areas of South Africa still fall within the jurisdiction of traditional chiefs, and therein lies one major contradiction. In the new South Africa with a constitution that espouses equality between the sexes, such equality remains theoretical for rural people. Women who live in rural areas around Umtata remain under the guardianship of chiefs, or of their husbands, fathers, or sons. Any project that promotes human development, including the development of women, still requires approval from a traditional chief. So while women may be engaged in projects that enable them to be economically independent, they must at the same time battle deeply set traditional attitudes from chiefs.

Despite the challenges described above, women around the Umtata area have started a wide range of projects, such as handicrafts, pottery, bakery, and wire making. The University of Transkei, through the Gender Studies Program, has formed a partnership with women in the surrounding area, supporting their efforts in various ways, including making available the use of the University radio system. Through the radio system, women in different parts of Umtata can share ideas and network with each other. This has been effective in bringing women together who otherwise were isolated from one another, working on different projects.

ADAPT: Curbing Violence at the Grassroots
Christine Motlalepule addressed one of the problems that women face all over the world: violence directed at them as women. She noted that while women in South Africa have played a part in the struggle against colonialism and white oppression, violence against them, including rape, continues to be endemic.

Christine cited some of the work being done by her organization, Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT), in curbing violence at grassroots as well as structural levels. ADAPT educates women who are victims of domestic violence about their rights and how to present their cases in court. The organization runs training programs that promote gender sensitivity to prosecutors and court professionals who handle cases of domestic violence. The organization also makes presentations to the legislature at regional and national levels, to make certain that policies that protect victims of violence are enacted and implemented. In general, ADAPT underscores the importance of peace, and this is embodied in the organization’s motto: “World peace begins at home.”
South African women are involved in reconstruction of their society and are also traveling a road in that process that is significantly linked to the road traveled by African American women. Globalization of the economy stabilizes and expands, rather than reduces, violence against women, who are utilized as cheap labor and who suffer from reduced resources in health, education, and housing. Historically disenfranchised, South African and African American women are particularly vulnerable to these injustices because they already lack access to resources such as land and education. Reconstruction in both contexts is fraught with contradictions and difficulties.

What, then, does “recovery” mean? Grounded in a long history of resistance, women from both regions work tirelessly in grassroots movements and benefit from both exposure and collaboration. Through participation at such conferences, women support and assist each other in achieving their goals domestically and internationally. We must continue to link our analyses and institutions across national boundaries and to disseminate information about what is working and where we need to rethink our strategies. Without such linkages and information the dire news we ingest daily can be disempowering in and of itself.

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