

The Soap-Opera in Nairobi

The International Women's Film Forum 1985 faced some unusual problems

NAIROBI, Kenya, hosted the conference to mark the end of the Women's Decade. Over 10,000 women from all over the world gathered as part of the Non-Government Organisations Conference (NGO) to celebrate 10 years dedicated to women's issues to assess and evaluate the impact of the decade

on the lives and status of women around the world. The NGO Conference began with the official opening on 10 July in Kenya Road House. The city was brought to a standstill as thousands of women piled into the centre to listen to the inauguration speeches.

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A major feature of the NGO Conference was the Film Forum and series of workshops providing a unique opportunity for cross-cultural exchange of women's visions and experiences in film and video.

The Film Forum was not without its problems, the main one stemming from the Kenyan government itself. All the films and videos for which they had no mandate were subject to censorship. The Kenyan government claimed they were unprepared for the volume of films, resulting in many films not being cleared by the censors. It was suggested they might consider passing the majority of the films and videos on documentations. This was considered and rejected. Almost six days of screening of videos were lost, many of which had been produced by women from Third World countries using videos as a teaching and training tool. All the films on lesbian issues were censored.

As part of the Film Forum, a number of workshops were held by women from around the world who shared their experiences, skills and information on a variety of areas related to film. The workshops were divided into two sections. One section focused on ways in which film and video is being used as a tool for social change, education and training. Women from Mali, Sierra Leone, India, Pakistan, shared their experiences of how film and video is used as a means of education. A number of women activists from India shared their experiences of how they use film and video to initiate dialogue and debate on issues like women's rights, equality and liberation.

The second section focused on the marketing and exhibition of films, organising film festivals and other ways of expanding distribution. Women also discussed the possibilities of developing national and international networks to enable the flow of information. It was stressed that such networks should not simply be "cinema networks" but shall be linked very clearly to the users of these films.

The Film Forum provided a unique opportunity to see the range of films made by women from all over the world and to celebrate images of women made by women. Judging from the quality of the films, it is clear that there is no shortage of women with production, management and technical skills. What is needed now is the sharing of these skills and experiences to advance the role of women in this very important medium.

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FILM FORUM/NAIROBI 1985

Nairobi, Kenya hosted the Conference to mark the end of the Women's Decade. Over 10,000 women from all over the world gathered as part of the Non-Government Organisations Conference (NGO) to celebrate 10 years dedicated to women's issues to assess and evaluate the impact of the decade on the lives and status of women around the world. The NGO Conference began with the official opening on 10 July in Kenya Road House. The City was brought to a standstill as thousands of women piled into the centre to listen to the inauguration speeches.

This was the third meeting since the decade was declared in 1975 in Mexico. The second was held in Copenhagen. Women who arrived for NGO Conference in Nairobi had travelled often with little or no assistance from their respective governments. The power of 10,000 women gathered in one place had to be experienced to be believed. Over 100 workshops were organised daily covering every conceivable issue under the heading of Equality, Development and Peace. In addition many informal workshops took place daily on the grass, over coffee, lunch and in the halls of residence. From morning to evening, the campus buzzed with the sound of women talking, sharing experience, singing and dancing.

A major feature of the NGO Conference was the Film Forum and series of workshops providing a unique opportunity for cross cultural exchange of women's visions and experiences in film and video. The Film Forum was assembled by Hanna Fisher of Harbourfront, Canada with assistance from an International Steering Committee. The Committee was made up of representatives from India, Latin America, Africa, Europe, Britain, North America and Canada. The main criteria for the selection of films and videos was that they should be made by women for women, about women and women's issues, and should have been produced within the last decade. The programme included 35mm, 16mm and videos, produced by women. Over 150 videos were brought to Nairobi along with some 200 16mm and 35mm films.

From the body of material assembled, it was clear to us as the organisers that women across the world had made a major intervention in the area of film and video and taken control of the means of production. It was also interesting that women the world over shared many of the same ideas, hopes, angers, fears and frustrations. For this reason the programme very naturally fell into areas of Women's Concerns; Women in Politics; Women in Education; Women in Peace Movement; Women in Struggle to name a few.

The presence of a number of film makers helped to stimulate debate about the content and the making of these films. Women shared common experiences of raising finances; access to training, equipment, distribution and promotion of their films. All the films will be free and open to the Kenyan Public in general.

The Film Forum was not without its problems, the main one stemming from the Kenyan Government itself. All the films and videos for which they had no mandate were subject to censorship. The Kenyan Government claimed they were unprepared for the volume of films, resulting in many films not being cleared by the Censors. It was suggested they might consider passing majority of the films and videos on documentations. This was considered and rejected. We lost almost six days of screening of videos, many of which had been produced by women from Third World countries using videos as a teaching and training tool. All the films on Lesbian issues were censored.

As part of the Film Forum, a number of workshops were also held by women from around the world who shared their experiences, skills and information on a variety of areas related to film. The workshops were divided into two sections. One section focused on ways in which film and video is being used as a tool for social change, education and training. Women from Mali, Sierra Leone, India, Pakistan shared their experiences of how film and video is used as a means of educating. A number of women activists from India shared their experiences of how they use film and video to initiate dialogue and debate on issues like women's rights, equality and liberation.

The second section focused on the marketing and exhibition of films, organising film festivals and other ways of expanding distribution. Women also discussed the possibilities of developing national and international networks to enable flow of information. It was stressed that such networks should not simply be "cinema networks" but shall be linked very clearly to the users of these films.

Despite some of the setbacks, the Film Forum and the workshops were well attended and many of the films screened were picked up for distribution. An informal network of distributors, film makers, producers and users was set up to enable a greater flow of information and films particularly of developing countries.

Organising a film programme thousands of miles away is no easy task and much credit must go to Hanna Fisher Programme Director who worked extremely hard in achieving the impossible. The Film Forum provided a unique opportunity to see the range of films made by women from all over the world and to celebrate images of women made by women. Judging from the quality of the films it is clear that there is no shortage of women with production, management and technical skills. What is needed now is the sharing of these skills and experiences to advance the role of women in this very important medium. Women are no longer just the subject matter but rather they control the destiny of their images.

Written by: Parminder Vir
Member of the International Steering Committee

Parminder advised on films for India and Britain. She also spoke at a number of the meetings.

Note to Readers: If you are interested in finding out more about the informal network on distribution please contact Parminder Vir.
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