

WOMEN OF TOMORROW

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AUGUST, 1957: the great horse-shoe amphitheatre of the Sala Santitham, Bangkok—the last word in international conference halls—looked like a herbaceous border, so brilliant were the silks and saris of the women from fifteen Asian nations who had come to attend the Seminar organized by U.N.O. on the Civic Responsibilities and Increased Participation of Asian Women in Public Life.

Burma, Cambodia, China (or rather, Formosa), Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaya, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sarawak, Singapore and Thailand had all sent participants, for in all these countries women now have the vote, and politics and the professions are open to them. Fifteen non-governmental organizations sent observers; they included the Associated Countrywomen of the World, the Young Women's Christian Association, the World Association of Girl Guides, the World Women's Christian Temperance Union, the International Union of Business and Professional Women, and four Catholic bodies: Pax Romana, the World Federation of Catholic Young Women and Girls, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, and the Catholic International Union for Social Service at whose behest I was there. And I think I was the only European present.

When I looked over my programme, I realized that U.N.O. had indeed gathered together some of the most able women in the East. India had sent a member of Parliament and of the Constituent Assembly, a quick-witted person, never at a loss for a word; Cambodia, a Professor of Primary Education, distinguished by the quiet chic of her national costume and her sound commonsense. Japan's participant, always incisive, quick to make a point, was Chief of the Women's Section in the Ministry of Labour. Pakistan had sent the editor-proprietor of a newspaper, most lovely to look at, and extraordinarily well-informed. The Philippines delegate was the Executive Vice-President of the Women's University, always exquisitely dressed, always ready

to steer the most difficult discussions and to put order into the most verbose resolutions. In fact, as I got to know them, I found they were all brilliant, sophisticated women, widely read and widely travelled, each not only well able to hold her own in discussions with world experts, but also remarkable for her integrity and independence of mind.

By the time we had got through the first few sessions, I realized that these Asian women were not only just as capable as, but even more capable than, many of their western sisters whose debates I had so often listened to in Europe.

I had wondered whether we should have a spate of brilliant theory, unrelated to practical problems: I found that whatever these women were discussing, politics, literacy, health and hygiene, they were always concerned with giving sound ideas a practical expression. It was no use talking about civic rights and good citizenship, they all agreed, unless the great mass of the feminine population could be made to see that citizenship begins in the home. First, the women must see their responsibilities in the home; then they must learn to look outwards, and realize that better homes would come through co-operation with other home-makers. Only in this way could they see that society as a whole is the setting in which and through which all may come to have better homes and a fuller and happier life. In the same way, it was idle to try and teach the illiterate to read and write unless these skills were linked with other skills, home-management, cooking, sewing, child-care, even food production, which would tend to raise the standard of life and appeal at once to people's desire to better themselves. So in all these countries, women's organizations are working to bring education, knowledge of hygiene, understanding of what citizenship means, into the homes of the people.

For these women see the home, the family, as the basic unit of society: there can be no such thing as a good state unless it is founded upon good homes. This point seems to stand out even in the dry and formal record of the proceedings.

But there was another point, on which they kept insisting, the importance of religion. It does not appear so clearly in the official summary; yet when I look at my own notes, taken at the time, I see how constantly it kept recurring. Over and over again, someone would take the microphone and say that the women of

the East are very religious. Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, Christians, all were at one on that. However divergent their creeds, they agreed on the basic principle: there is a God; he made the universe; by his Law, all men are bound, and no true happiness, no true progress, is possible if religion is left aside.

In fact, all their criticisms of the West—and they made many—were directed against the break-up of the family and the increasing indifference to religion which they had noticed for themselves on their travels.

But though they were critical of the West, they were never bitter; in fact, all the proceedings were pervaded by a spirit of generosity. I shall never forget the way the Korean participant turned to Japan and said: 'Though we are glad the Japanese domination is over, yet we are grateful for the many things you taught us.' Still less shall I forget the courtesy with which so many delegates came up to me after I had made an intervention, to say how pleased they were to find that we were agreed upon so many vital points, and how Burma added: 'Of course we are glad to be independent, but we still have much to learn from you, and if you come to lecture in our country, you will be among friends.'

It was as if they all felt that the times are evil and the one great new factor is the slow emergence of millions of women in the East, whose influence, if rightly used, may well be dynamic enough to redeem the times.

For though in public debates the delegates all tended to stress their country's achievements, every private conversation tended to concentrate on difficulties to be overcome. When I asked one of the most able participants what problem she thought most pressing, she said, with immense earnestness: 'Bribery and corruption; that is the evil which is undermining all our countries and frustrating all our efforts; that is the evil we women must fight: and we know it.'

But of course, these highly educated women of the Seminar represented a tiny élite. Behind them, there is, in most nations, a growing professional class; women are training everywhere as teachers, doctors, nurses or civil servants. And behind them again, there is a much larger group of women, living in fairly easy circumstances, who have at least a smattering of education. But even added together, these three groups are very small compared

with the total population of women, women so often borne down by excessive child-bearing, inert from ill-health and hunger, pre-occupied only with the day-to-day problems of feeding and bringing up their families, that great mass of women to whom all these newly given civic rights can as yet mean absolutely nothing.

So when I left Bangkok, I wanted to see for myself something of the conditions under which they lived and get some idea of how much all the high-sounding schemes I had heard discussed amounted to in practice. And I had the chance of visiting Cambodia and Vietnam, Burma and Pakistan.

Cambodia is a Buddhist country; though there has been a French mission at work since 1755 or so, there are only three thousand-odd Cambodian Catholics out of a population of about five million. But Buddhism has taught the people to think more of the will of Almighty God than of material possessions. As an earnest Cambodian magistrate said to me: 'We are contented here, because our society is founded on religion and the family.'

It is perhaps easy to be contented in Cambodia, for like Thailand, Burma and Vietnam, it is extremely fertile; it can easily support its population. And there is no slum problem; you rarely find people herded together in grossly insanitary conditions. They mostly live in tiny wattle cabins or in wooden houses on stilts, if they are getting on in the world. And though rice is an exacting crop, no one need starve. But there is an urgent need for improved medical services, which the Government, in conjunction with World Health, is trying to meet. Worms, malaria, T.B. seem to be the worst pests; but the maternal and infant mortality rate is very high indeed, though no exact figures are available.

Women in general do not take any very active interest in these problems; they are extremely home-bound. Yet they have no need to fight masculine prejudice, for they are accepted as equal partners. A Cambodian husband calls his wife his 'house', for she manages all his practical affairs and minds his money. She is so much respected that her husband is expected to provide not only for her, but for her parents!

But though she runs her home, looks after her husband's interest, has a little business of her own as like as not, she is reluctant to be drawn into the two big welfare schemes, the newly revived Red Cross and the *Entre-Aide Féminine*. The latter

exists largely to provide child-welfare clinics, not only in Phnom Penh, the capital, but in all the larger centres. But the work is handicapped for lack of voluntary helpers. Money can be found easily enough, but very few women respond to an appeal for workers. Nor do they willingly take up nursing as a career; they marry young and leave jobs outside the home to their husbands. So in general, you find only male attendants in the hospitals. The idea of giving personal service to the poor just does not seem to make sense to the majority of Cambodian women; you find it only among the few *évoluées*, who have been educated in French schools and universities.

Women, as a general rule, lag behind men in education, for the Bonzes have always taught boys in the pagodas and it is only recently that, with the employment of lay teachers, little girls may go too. But there is a drive for primary education, though it is held up because there are two thousand teachers too few. And so far as I know, the women's organizations are doing nothing to fill the gap.

In Vietnam, the picture is completely different, perhaps because the Catholic population is now twelve per cent of the total, and for years the Church has been setting the pace as regards the service of the poor and the education of the children. But although so many of the social services, old people's homes, convalescent homes, orphanages, and so on, are officially entrusted to the Church, the women of Vietnam are energetic, idealistic and rapidly gaining a considerable influence. A woman deputy (of whom there are six) assured me that even in the last election, 'Les femmes ont beaucoup décidé'. As in Cambodia, women go in for business, though only in a small way. I was told there are no women *entrepreneurs*. But they have a talent for nosing out bargains and putting them on the market at just the right moment. And though they are reluctant to invest the profit in a big concern, or even bank it, they are getting keener and keener on putting it into their daughters' education. So, whereas a few years ago, only a few mandarin families sent their girls to the smart Catholic French-medium schools, the majority of the pupils today come from middle-class homes. And as a matter of course, those with sufficient ability go on to train as doctors, nurses, teachers or civil servants.

They are pioneers in social work, too; I saw two orphanages

in Saigon, both run, and very well run, by women. One was quite remarkable; though it is housed only in rather inadequate ex-army huts, it is a real home for the three hundred and seventy children who live there. The very best is made of very little, and the children have a spontaneous gaiety, a natural yet courteous inquisitiveness which is quite enchanting.

I think it is true to say that the faith has a profound influence on the Vietnamese woman of today, even if she is not a Christian. And certainly, the Church has a tremendous attraction for very many. The number of vocations is most impressive; I saw one Dominican Convent where there are two hundred Vietnamese Sisters and a hundred and three postulants, not to mention a queue of would-be postulants still at school. The nuns at Les Oiseaux—the best boarding-school in Dalat—and the Sisters of Charity working up there in the hills, both told me the same tale, of girls in tears because they could not be baptized at school, and writing afterwards to say they had been baptized and what order should they enter.

When I met and talked with a group of women at the top of their professions, they echoed the women I met at Bangkok: a just society, they said, must be founded on sound moral principles; you cannot have a good society unless you have good homes. And though they differed in their religious beliefs, they were agreed on that basic fact: religion matters.

One of them said: 'I think we women are clearer about the difference between right and wrong than men'. Another added: 'We know that corruption is not only wrong—it is not practical.'

Vivid, dynamic people, the women of Vietnam; they combine a bent for abstract speculation, a love of philosophy or theology, with good practical ability.

On my way home, I stopped off to lecture for the British Council in Rangoon, so I was put in touch with the Burmese ladies who are trying, through a whole network of women's organizations, to bring an understanding of civic responsibility, education, hygiene and so on, to the poor. For there is the usual gulf in Burma between the educated minority and the illiterate majority. There is no hunger problem, no acute population pressure; and as it is a Buddhist country, the people tend to be content with things the way they are; they have enough—why should they want more? So, as one of the most eminent Burmese

ladies told me, 'We have not only to show women that better conditions for home life are possible, but we have to teach women to want them.'

Intensely practical and profoundly moral in outlook, the ladies of Burma are very sensitive to social injustice and have a great sense of their personal responsibility. So they give an enormous amount of time and energy to working for the various projects started by their different societies. I saw an excellent maternity clinic in a poor district, served by cheerful, capable-looking Burmese nurses, a remand home for girls, a nursery school, and also the Mass Education Centre, government-run this, where men and women employed in hospitals and other institutions are given a basic training in the principles of social work, and where teams of men and women are trained to be 'all-purposes' rural workers, who will go out to isolated districts and teach the people everything from reading and writing to the digging of wells.

I talked to women doctors, women magistrates, women social workers and women writers. And they all had this terribly serious outlook. The women writers, for instance, though they looked so charming, fluttering about in lovely longyis and pretty scarves, were most concerned about the right use of the influence they felt they were beginning to have through the press. Most of them wrote women's pages or stories, or even romances. 'You see', one of them said, 'we feel it is as important to build up a nation's character as its health.'

Well-balanced, sensible extroverts, the women of Burma, I thought as I left to fly to Pakistan across the Bay of Bengal. And almost at once, I was aware of a dramatic change; I had left the contented lands behind. In Pakistan, famine is a constantly recurring problem; I was told that about seventy per cent of the population is permanently under-nourished. Here, the population pressure is acute, and where there is a concentration of industry, the living conditions of the poor are bestial.

And in Dacca, at any rate, you seldom see a woman in the streets. Here purdah lingers: even 'emancipated' women go out to tea with each other swathed in the burka, that shapeless garment in which they are half-smothered, and out of which they peer through eye-hole slits. Yet educated women are slowly beginning to exert some influence. Encouraged by U.N.O., by their own

All-Pakistan Women's Association and helped by the wives of westerners on the staffs of embassies, missions and big business concerns, they are beginning to undertake voluntary work, particularly in education. I met quite half a dozen ladies, all of whom had collected several degrees each, who gave their free time to teaching their illiterate sisters to read and write. And I was shown over one centre where classes are held in literacy and home-management for women in purdah. As they are far too shy to walk a few yards along the street, even tucked into their burkas, they climb over the garden wall, burka and all, to reach this haven where they can learn so much, unseen by any but feminine eyes.

In sharp contrast, you find women who are completely 'out', as they say, women who are widely travelled, young women who go to the University and attend the same lectures as men, women working in the hospital, training to be nurses. And very heroic they are, these nurses; for nursing is despised as a menial occupation and any woman who takes it up may well forfeit her chance of marriage. So there is a real 'Florence Nightingale' spirit among the women training at the teaching hospital where I went to give a lecture; but even they cannot quite escape purdah; I had to brush aside a bit of old sheet slung across the entrance to their quarters.

It is no wonder that the women of Dacca seemed to me more introverted, less sure of themselves, than those I had met in Burma and Vietnam, for though several seats in the National Assembly are reserved for women, in actual practice, many of them are still fighting for the right to breathe fresh air with their faces uncovered.

Yet here too, wherever I went among women, I always heard the West criticized because of its indifference to religion and the break-up of family life, though I often heard it praised for the comparative integrity of its administrators. For whenever the talk veered towards politics, someone would always refer quite bluntly to bribery and corruption as the great evil against which women must combine.

Even when I flew down to more sophisticated West Pakistan, people were acutely aware of this, though they spoke less openly about it. That may well be because they are less introverted and feel less frustrated, for they have a far more highly organized

and more influential section of the All Pakistan Women's Association, which is responsible for literally dozens of projects to improve conditions among women and children. Women here have a tremendous sense of social justice and a great interest in social problems; every problem they tackle is studied most thoroughly, and the work is then planned for two or three years ahead. Some professional social workers are employed, and there are excellent schemes for mobilizing voluntary helpers to work with them.

Certainly all the experiments I saw were first-rate, particularly the colony they have built and organized for craftsmen who are enabled to live and work there at their skilled trades in their own homes. There is no doubt that this women's organization is doing pioneer work which will have a great effect upon the future of Pakistan's social services.

During my three months tour, I must have met and talked with hundreds of women, of very different types; I certainly saw dozens of projects, and I came home feeling that the women of the Far East do represent a new and most wholesome influence. About essentials, they speak with one voice: in Pakistan, Burma, Vietnam, even little Cambodia, they all said the same thing: 'You can have no good society unless it is founded upon religion and the family'.

'It is so important', one of the leading women of Burma said to me, 'that women should learn to stand together and speak with one voice; if we do, the men will have to listen.' But if the enlightened women of the East succeed in educating their still illiterate sisters in their own sound principles, their voices will carry far beyond the confines of their own countries; it may well be that the whole world will have to listen.