

## THE PEACE TENT

### ITS ORIGIN, ITS IMPACT, ITS FUTURE

The Peace Tent was a part of the Forum '85, an unofficial gathering that overlapped the United Nations Conference on Women, held in Nairobi, Kenya, in July 1985. It is estimated that 11,000 women attended the conference in Nairobi. It is estimated that 10,000 of those women visited the Peace Tent at one time or another. It grew out of the initiative and financial support of one American woman.

The concept of the Peace Tent was born within the framework of the U. N. Decade for Women, peace being one of the three themes of the Decade. Yet, some of us felt that the issue of peace was lost in the planning for the Nairobi Conference and that it was crucial to focus on that issue the emphasis it deserved.

The Peace Tent was born in Geneva in 1984 when feminists from Western Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Africa formed a group called Feminists International for Peace and Food. In the spring of 1985, a steering committee for the Peace Tent was formed, comprised of representatives of international organizations such as the World YWCA,

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), World Council of Churches, International Federation of University Women, and International Democratic Federation of Women, as well as representatives of the original organizers, the Feminist International for Peace and Food. The formation of this steering committee and sustained efforts to conform to certain guidelines met with the approval of the NGO Planning Committee, and the Peace Tent was on its way.

The Peace Tent statement was formulated by members of Feminist International for Peace and Food. It became an integral part of every program in the Peace Tent. It states succinctly the purpose of the Peace Tent, and it set the tone for conflict resolution:

"The Peace Tent is the international feminist alternative to men's conflict and war. It is the place where finding peaceful solutions to conflict, both in personal lives and in the public arena, is the priority. The opportunity is offered for every woman's voice to be heard.

It is important that women whose countries are locked in conflict meet and communicate to expose the patriarchal barriers to peace. Patriarchal values and logic constitute the roots of violence: men against women, men

against men, race against race, nation against nation, religion against religion, and rich against poor. This logic and its values create hunger and death for millions.

The Peace Tent offers the opportunity to all women at the Forum to share life experiences and information on common causes, and a place where women can celebrate differences and rejoice in similarities. The Peace Tent creates the space for women to demonstrate their skills and knowledge of human relationships for use in the public sphere which has been denied them. In the Peace Tent, women can substitute women's truths for patriarchal lies through dialogue, films, and exhibits; women's joy for patriarchal pessimism through song, dance, and art. The aim of the Peace Tent is to bring women's peacemaking will and consciousness to the world, which so desperately needs it. "

The Peace Tent was actually three -- a large tent and two smaller ones. The site of the Peace Tent was critical to its purpose and its success, for it was located in a central part of the University of Nairobi campus, easily accessible, its bright blue and white awnings almost compelling passers-by to drop in.

Our first crisis arose when Coca-Cola pre-empted that space with its own exhibition booths, but after long and sometimes heated negotiations, we prevailed. We kept that central location for the Peace Tent, and Coca-Cola moved elsewhere.

The large tent was used for programs expected to draw large audiences, such as the Middle Eastern dialogue (which proved to be the Peace Tent's first test of credibility), the U.S.-U.S.S.R. dialogue, the "Women of South Africa." In the large tent, separate "rooms" were created by 24 free-standing exhibit boards. And in the foyer of the Tent, members of Feminist International for Peace and Food distributed their materials. Balloons, arts and crafts exhibits, and peace banners festooned the walls. Kenyan wicker tables, chairs, and settees created an inviting place to pause in the hustle and bustle of the Conference activities. All of these factors created an ambience that contributed to the success of the Peace Tent.

The 24 free-standing exhibit boards soon proved to be entirely inadequate; we could have used 3 x 24! The clamor for exhibit space forced us to improvise a policy for display of the exhibits in order to make room for everyone. The exhibits rotated every three days; each organization was entitled to one board, and each organization was free to display whatever it chose in its space. There was no censorship of any kind.

One small tent was used for informal gatherings, for demonstrations in crafts, and perhaps most significantly, for "Life Experiences" sessions each afternoon. These sessions, well attended throughout the Conference, were what we commonly know as "consciousness-raising." However, this was a new concept for many, particularly the African women, who were fascinated with the idea of a relaxed gathering place where women could participate in whatever conversations were being held, where they could come and go as they chose, and where they could speak their mind with the certainty of being heard.

The other small tent was used for video and film presentations --- again so many more than we expected. Contrary to the problems of censorship at the National Theatre (which precipitated a crisis by refusing to show the Palestinian film, "Lila and the Wolves") there was no censorship in this tent, which we called "The Visual Tent."

To keep the Peace Tent going and serving its intended purpose was a job requiring constant attention and staffing. We had planned before the conference, but intentionally preserved our flexibility. The Steering Committee met on a regular basis beginning the week before the conference. Then, Feminist International for Peace and Food met each evening to evaluate the day's program and to plan for ensuing programs.

On the second day of the conference, we adopted new procedures that proved to be of enormous benefit. In a brief ritual each morning, the Peace Tent statement was read, a reminder for all of us. We encouraged the audience to forego applause and to substitute waving their hands as a gesture of approval. Discussion, presentations, and dialogue were interspersed with song to sustain the spirit of community. We tried very hard to see that each point of view was given its time to be heard.

The scheduling in the Peace Tent fell into two general categories -- programs addressing traditional political problems and programs that introduced feminist approaches and values. The programs I mentioned earlier -- the Middle Eastern dialogue, the U.S.-U.S.S.R. dialogue, and the South African women --- addressed traditional political problems. Under the second category were programs on "Feminism and Peace," "Conflict Resolution," and "Where Do We Go After Nairobi?" Scheduling became a exacting task, for we had many more requests for programs than we had expected. The Steering Committee's job was to balance flexibility and order and to insure equal consideration for all points of view and for the women of so many different cultures.

This impromptu response to the needs and wishes of the women at the conference was one of The Peace Tent's greatest strengths. On one

occasion, a very large assembly of women was moved into the Peace Tent to continue a discussion of strategy in responding to the issue of censorship. Then, the threat of closing the tent came up during the weekend of July 13 when a "friendly nation" complained to the Kenyan government of the activities in the Peace Tent. Specifically, the ambassador of the "friendly nation" had heard a dissident group from his country criticizing their government. We were gratified that, in the face of this threat, the NGO Planning Committee was firm in its support of the Peace Tent, and it remained open. Even our closing ceremony was cut short when the DAWN group came expecting to use the tent for a program on racism. We gave them the floor.

A large globe on which everyone could write was a part of the Peace Tent from its opening and was, after the closing ceremony, delivered to the Chairperson of the NGO Conference, Ms. Shahanie.

And we are planning for the future. The Peace Tent seems too vital a concept to die in Nairobi. One woman has suggested a Peace Tent at all conferences. Another idea is that the Peace Tent be mobile, moving from one troubled area of the world to another. Or it has been suggested that the Peace Tent be given a permanent home.

Whatever its future, it bodes well for the world that the Peace Tent have a future and that it stand, as it did in Nairobi, as the symbol of the international feminist alternative to conflict and war, a place for finding peaceful solutions to conflicts, and a place where every women's voice can be heard.

... Frances T. Farenthold

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