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CONCERNING WOMEN IN MOZAMBIQUE

*Text of address by Stephanie Urdang
to the Third Annual African Activist
Association Conference, May 1981*

I was in Mozambique for three and one-half months from October last year and travelled with the Women's Organisation with the goal of writing about what is happening now that Mozambique is independent and trying to assess what is happening to women in the first five years of independence. Mozambique gained its independence in 1975. Because time is very short, I think it is important to have time for questions. I am going to presume that people know something about Mozambique, for instance where it is and that it was colonized by the Portuguese. If there are questions later, I will be happy to answer. And what I am going to share with you after a short while is the kind of impression I got in travelling around Mozambique, a sense of real difficulty I was confronted with in trying to put into practice FRELIMO's programme, I mean ideology, concerning women.

I think many of you know about a statement by Machel which is often quoted. It was made in fact in 1973 at the opening of the Women's Organization, which says, "that the liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for our revolution, a guarantee for its continuity and a precondition for its victory." And what I was trying to see at the time I was there was to observe what does the liberation movement mean in the Mozambican context. I think what FRELIMO emphasized is that there are various stages or phases of the revolution in process during the armed struggle. The principal task was to oust the Portuguese from Mozambique. And in that period it was very important for women to be involved in that process and in the armed struggle while at the same time trying to work for equality and for equal political status. The second phase is the development of the country and the principal task during this period is seen as production, and so women are being encouraged very strongly to participate in production. In the Soviet Union and Cuba, women had been called to pick up jobs in factories, to be part of the industrialization process. In fact that does not happen in Mozambique. It is a very low level of industrialization. When the Portuguese left, they left very few facilities behind and there were very few jobs available. As I think we are familiar with, many Mozambicans who went to the South African mines. This is a process which is continuing but has decreased considerably so there are many men who are seeking work inside Mozambique and it is very hard to come up with a whole lot of jobs that women could just flow into in keeping with the ideal of involving women in production and in the wage labor force. But the principle is there and I did

certainly see a number of instances where this was being put into effect.

Another aspect is the question of communal villages which are being established in the countryside. I am not sure of the figure, but I have read that there are something like a million people living in communal villages at this point. Some of the villages I visited were as big as 16,000 to 20,000 people. Others were 2,000 to 3,000. The initial design was, I think, to have villages of a size 2,000 to 3,000, but I think this has grown out of its proportion in certain areas, particularly Gaza province in the south which experienced very dramatic flooding in 1977. The Limpopo River, which runs through the province, flooded, causing people to flee from their homes; people were literally plucked off their houses to be saved and taken to dry ground; and when the need obviously arose for people to be re-settled, it was fairly easy in this particular area to organize the people into communal villages. This is one of the reasons why there are many people living in communal villages in Gaza province and why they are so large. Anyway, the communal villages are being set up. I visited about roughly ten communal villages in five different provinces. They are seen as the basis of the new Mozambique, a place in which the socialist principles can begin to be set in practice, into motion. They are seen as areas which will be self-sufficient economically so that agricultural cooperatives would be established in the communal villages with the hope of providing self-sufficiency for the community. I asked to see villages and I was shown the better villages that were working more efficiently. It was very noticeable, and I was quick to see that there are a lot of problems in setting up these villages. One can say at the theoretical level "yes, they are needed"; it is another thing actually putting them into practice. One finds in the villages that the agricultural cooperatives are being organized, that the workers in their agricultural cooperatives come from various families with one of each family working in the cooperatives. This means that every family has a member working in the cooperative, but not more than one man per camp to work there. In the south one finds a lot of women working in the cooperatives; in the north not many of them at all.

Basically women continue to do subsistence agriculture. You have a country which has been experiencing a lot of tremendous droughts, a country that is extremely underdeveloped and the way food is produced in this country is through the labour of women, basically, and this does continue. There is discussion about the need for this to change, for collectivization, but this is something very much in the future and not talked about concretely at all at this stage. So that if you look at the daily life of women in the communal villages, you find that their workload is extremely heavy. They would get up very early,

depending on the day they would maybe work in the collective fields that belong to the Women's Organization that have been set up, they would certainly work for some hours in the day on their own individual fields, come back maybe at 11:30 when the sun is too hot to continue to work in the fields, will then come home, prepare food, and tend to their children. If they are involved in literacy, they would go for two hours to literacy classes. They will come after that if they are involved in the Women's Organization or maybe members of the Peoples Assembly they will have to attend general meetings of the villages that are held regularly. They could come home and cook food. They will be working on tasks that were considered the male domain previously--this is another emphasis that is placed on the need to prove that they can also take on men's work. So that you find women building huts, for instance, collecting the reeds and helping make bricks for the huts. This kind of work was not previously done by women in general. And women will speak broadly about the fact they are beginning to take on tasks that were previously men's. Another reason why women are encouraged to build huts or houses is that previously as the houses were built by men, if the marriage broke down, it was simple for the man to expect the woman to leave and say well this is my house, I built it, and the hope is that now that women participate in the building it won't be such an automatic process and the wife will have some say over the house.

There are other tasks, collecting water, doing laundry, many many hours of pounding food to prepare it for cooking, and it is hard for me to believe that women have enough hours in the day frankly to be able to perform all of these tasks. Certainly some of them are easier because for those women living in the communal villages, most of the villages that I had visited had pumps, some of them were electric generated pumps, others were hand pumps situated in the middle of the village. Some places, in the north for instance, women would walk about 20 kilometers to collect water (picking up a bucket of water, you know how heavy that is, and the container would be something about this size). And women walk back about 20 kilometers carrying the water on their heads. For those who have moved into communal villages water is available. But, as an example of the problems of underdevelopment, one of the villages I visited that has a population of 60,000 there were four pumps, electric generated pumps that had been provided by the community. Three out of the four were out of working order. So that although women are not expected to exert all that much of effort, a lot of time is being spent in line waiting for turns to get the water.

This is just the basic problem. There are very few trained that would be able to repair the pumps and so when a pump broke down a long time is spent in waiting for somebody to be available to come to the village to repair the pump. This was the concern

that was being expressed for Kabidogare, for instance, where there was a very grave shortage of water and where a whole system of pumps and pipes was being established when I was there; but in fact, this sort of infrastructural water was being provided for while some people were being sent at that point only to Makandi to train as repair people. And they would not be ready for another two years and what is going to happen in that period when the pumps started breaking down? So that the kind of workload that was being distributed is very great. Trying to get some sense of what men were doing to alleviate the really heavy workload, I would ask questions about women's impressions of this, and basically the answer was very much in the negative; that men were helping to some extent--and I did certainly see some men cooking as well as men washing clothes, looking after children--but that this is still done in the rural areas on a very limited level. The sense I got of the way in which women are encouraged to take on tasks that were previously seen as men's work was still a process of mobilization--mobilization is kind of a key word that one hears constantly throughout Mozambique. Political mobilization is needed in the continuing process to encourage people to work to reconstruct the new Mozambican society. Men, on the other hand, were not being mobilized for women's work. This was seen as something that would take much longer, something that needed to be done slowly, because tensions that would result within the family were seen as something that could really disrupt family life and so it was preferred to look at the problem as something that has to be worked over a longer period, that men needed to be spoken to with kind words, which was the phrase that was used often.

I think there are two sides to this: one is that there is an emphasis on work for the family at domestic level basis, that it should be seen as a kind of anonymous work, that women were important in the family, that they were the first educators of the children, that the family in some sense is seen as a primary cell of the party and it is the women's responsibility to take care of the children and to develop the children, at the first level, into the new militants of FRELIMO. So there was a process which was identifying women's work as being important, but not at the same time the need for men to take on women's work. This was described to me in various terms. Often I would hear the term "mechanistic"; we are not talking about the mechanistic restructuring of the roles within Mozambique at this stage. It is not a question of who washes the dishes or who cooks the food, it is a question of rebuilding the society, of women playing an equal part in political affairs, of equal respect for the family, and that when we have a new society, when we have the new family in Mozambique, then men will see that women are doing so much work and will automatically help their wives in the family in household tasks.

This was more of a kind of official line I guess. Speaking to women informally, I certainly got somewhat a different picture. Particularly women working in Maputo, working in various government ministries, women working in the party would say they were unhappy about the line and they felt that while this was not the principal task in the sense that they would not identify this as the main conflict at this point, in terms of the changing roles within family, it was something that needed to be attended to more consciously than it was being done at this point. It would be interesting to compare this maybe to the Cuban family. It very explicitly stated that men must help or take equal responsibility for household work with the women. And although I suspect that this has not made a major change in Cuba yet, it at least does provide a basis for that change and it provides a chance for women to challenge men to take on equal work where women choose to do so. The family code in Mozambique has been formulated; it has not yet been published. I gather that these kinds of principles are not embodied in the code in a specific form and I think it will be very interesting to see what happens in Mozambique when the code is published, when a lot of discussion will go around it. I think that women in certain instances particularly in Maputo, women that are in the towns are beginning to challenge this and I think that in the long run it is going to be women that will have to say "we are not prepared to take this heavy load any longer; men have to help us."

That is one facet. The other change which I think is very very important and I think really sometimes difficult for women in the West or in the United States to understand is the real importance of women taking part in social reconstruction programs. I think it is too easy to say that "oh, FRELIMO is not paying attention to family structures and that, therefore, they are failing." I think in this country there is tremendous emphasis on the changing roles within the family. I think it is also very important to understand what it means to a Mozambican woman who is given an opportunity to play an equal role within the processes of social reconstruction. The question of women taking on work within production, within this context, is stressed very very strongly. The 1976 conference of the Women's Organization, which was held in Maputo, was the first conference since independence. First, there are resolutions or directives concerning women: one of them was that women must work in all fields of work that were usually considered to be men's work and a number of jobs were delineated, for example, tractor drivers, bus drivers, motor mechanics, etc. And when you travel around Mozambique you do find women train drivers, women tractor drivers, women motor mechanics throughout the country. In one state farm I have visited, to give you an example, which is 80 kilometers from Maputo, something like 5,000 workers are employed there. It was previously owned by a Portuguese family who fled Mozambique after independence. I visited one of the blocks which

employed about 1,800 workers as agricultural workers, about 400 of these were women. Before independence no women had been employed in this plantation and after the 1976 conference it was decided that women should be employed, should be given an opportunity to work on the state farm and a period of a few weeks was set aside when only women were hired. Special applications were sent out and only women were hired during this period. That is how the 400 came to get jobs there. This was something that was advertised by the Women's Organization and it was very effective. Of course, 400 women is not high, but certainly it is an important beginning. And in talking to women who work there, it was interesting to find out their backgrounds. I spoke to a group of eight women who were working as agricultural workers and five of the eight had been married, had either no children at all or their children had died and had been driven out of their houses by their husbands because they did not provide children, and they said, fairly bitterly, that "we are only women if we produce children, we are not anything otherwise." And so they were in a situation where they have to find work. They said that when they arrived at the state farms to begin working they found a lot of resistance by men to their being employed there. The men would make sure that they got the worse tasks, such as spreading the manure fertilizer, because men resented the fact that women were working in state farms now and getting the same salaries, and the men were absolutely sure that women would be unable to do the heavy work that men were doing all the time. But after this initial resistance, men had accepted because they began to understand that women were proving that they could do the same work. The next sort of grumbling came when a number of women were chosen to train as tractor drivers. Of the 16 tractor drivers in this particular block I visited, 5 were women and this again had come out of the directive from the 1976 conference and pressure from the district Women's Organization at the state farm. The state farm organizers had decided to train women. This meant that the salary is virtually double, and so a lot of men were struck by the fact that women were being given an opportunity to do work that would give them a chance to get much higher salaries. But again, they also believed that women would not be able to drive tractors in the first place. But again, women seem to prove that they could do this and were accepted by their male colleagues.

In contrast, to show the kind of uneven development, in the tea-growing area of Maputo there are many people employed there on the tea complexes either as pickers or in the factories. There were no women employed as tea-pickers in Niassa area, for instance, something like 70% or 80% of the tea-pickers are women. There were very few women working in the factories, and in the state-owned factories that I have visited there were only about 12 women working as tea-pickers and few in the offices. In one of the privately-owned factories that I have visited there were

fewer numbers of women working as tea-pickers, but again, not as anything else. When I asked questions, I got fairly typical answers that the tea-pickers carry baskets on their backs, and obviously they cannot work as tea-pickers, and that women cannot work in the factories because, again, the work is too hard, the women showed more absenteeism in work, etc., etc. When I asked the Women's Organization about this they responded rather angrily and said that this was not the case, that men were trying hard to have more women employed in the factories and that it just was not working. On the other hand, in the state farm 7 out of 21 motor mechanics working on the tractors, buses, etc., that were owned by the state farm, 7 of them were women, and this again was a direct result of the 1976 directive. I think the difference in those two areas was quite stark and a lot had really to do with the fact that the Women's Organization in the district of Gurue was very badly organized. I was told that the leadership changed every few months, that there was a lot of concern about it, but very little was being done on the provincial level to train women cadres for Gurue and this resulted in very little to be done in trying to pressure change on the state farms and in that Moamba, for example, I was told the first state farms in terms of women were very very effective in that district.