

# WOMEN IN ACTION



Isis

international

3/92



*Women's Cultural Expressions*

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This issue of **Women in Action** was particularly enjoyable to prepare. We read through numerous materials at the Resource Center and found it inspiring to know that many individual women and women's groups from all over the world are using diverse forms of cultural expressions towards organizing and empowerment.

We feature various cultural forms from dance, painting, prose, poetry, theater, as well as other forms of cultural expressions of women such as the *arpilleras* in Latin America and the use of *khanga* in Africa.

We include women artists from Asia Pacific, Africa, the Caribbean, USA, and Europe. Cultural differences are no longer barriers when women express themselves through art. What comes through is our one goal of unity and strength among all of us. Art is one way of speaking a common language. We call on other women and groups who also use artistic forms of expression for empowerment. Please write us and share your experiences with our readers.

One of the women who have inspired us in our struggle for meaningful self-expression is black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde who died last Nov. 17. We remember Audre and the legacy of works she left behind. She will always be with us.

A special report coming from the first *Asian Indigenous Women's Conference* held in the Philippines focuses on women's voices representing 13 countries. Again there is a common thread among women and this became apparent in the declaration of unity expressed in a song.

Two conferences - the *7th International Women's Health Meeting* in Uganda and the *Women Empowering Communication* in Bangkok, Thailand are scheduled for this year and next. Isis is involved in both and we have regular updates on these activities. We encourage the participation of women from our network for these significant events.

As always, we await feedback from you and welcome any contributions that you may want us to publish in **Women in Action**. Our readers are our primary concern and we would like to know what you want. Do write us.

In sisterhood,

**Isis International Manila Collective**

### **Merging of third and first world perspectives of a feminist artist**

---

Dear sisters,

Since I returned from the World Student Christian Federation conference in Sri Lanka, my work has taken on a new direction. The themes in my work have always been directed from the perspective of women's liberation, but up till now this has been limited to my personal reactions and understanding of feminism within a first world context.

This has not only been derived from ignorance of issues, but also from lack of personal involvement with like-minded people working in the third world. Discussing feminist issues with women from the people's movement in Asia gave me a great sense of solidarity and encouragement to address women's issues on a global scale.

The series of photographs I am presently working on, aims to point out the connections in the struggle of first and third world women's movements. The concept of patriarchy as a global structure which oppresses all women at some level is the background against which to view these works.

I am also trying to emphasise the need for first world feminists to maintain our commitment to feminism, beyond the fight for legislative equal

opportunity in our own countries. I am constantly seeing connections between issues that were of major importance in feminist thought in the west twenty years ago (and are now considered to be out of date), and the same situations occurring in the present day conditions of women in developing countries. The two issues I am addressing are women's sexuality and the starvation of women.

Thank you so much for your support and interest in my work.

*Kia Kaha, Taku Tuahine!* (Be strong, my sister!)

With best wishes,

Julanne Morris  
245 Cumberland St.  
Otepoti/Dunedin  
Aotearoa/ New Zealand

**✉** Thank you for the update on your work. We are glad that you have taken on a broader perspective of feminism. We have included samples of your work in this issue. We are sending you an exchange subscription of **Women in Action**. --  
**Editors.**

**Subscription call from Pakistan news and features service**

---

Dear editors,

Greetings from Pakistan!

This is a word about **INDUS News and Features** from Pakistan, which focuses on human rights and development issues.

Pakistan is a country of growing interest to the outside world. Its special appeal lies in such factors as its proximity to the changing world segment comprising the nations of Afghanistan and Central Asia, its character as a major modernising Islamic state and its bordering giant states like India and China.

With a population of 122 million, growing at the rate of 3.1 per cent per year, and a literacy rate of less than 20 per cent, Pakistan faces an obvious challenge.

As a response to Pakistan's socioeconomic and political conditions, groups of people have come together on common platforms to work for upliftment, especially in the areas of human rights, women's rights, the environments, education, socioeconomic development and consciousness-raising through the arts and theater.

The independent section of Pakistan's press has played a supportive role in projecting such issues and building public awareness and pressure. This role has been particularly crucial in view of the fact that the electronic media in Pakistan is state-owned.

**INDUS** will be an independent service dealing primarily with these and related issues in the Pakistani region. The stories will be accurately, objectively and clearly written in English (600-1000 words). Subscribers will receive four stories a month, including photo-stories, with the added option of commissioning exclusive stories or spot information.

We would like you and your readers to write and let us know if you would be interested in subscribing to **INDUS**.

Truly yours,

Beena Sarwar  
Coordinator  
41, Lakshmi Mansions, The Mall,  
Lahore 51000, Pakistan

*☛ We know that many women's groups will be interested in getting information on women and development and other issues concerning women from Pakistan. More power to you! - Editors.*

**Research initiatives by Uganda indigenous women**

---

Dearest Isis,

**Action for Development (ACFODE)** is an indigenous nongovernmental women's organization in Uganda which works closely with other women's organizations in striving to improve and enrich the lives of women by helping them realize their full potential and enhancing their contribution to national development.

One of **ACFODE's** main objectives is to carry out research on women in order to have a clearer understanding of factors affecting women's emancipation and to try and influence national policies in favour of women. It has as one of its standing committees the Research Committee. The objectives of this committee include:

- to equip members of the research team with skills in research work;
- to create self-awareness of women by sharing with them **ACFODE's** research findings;
- to promote efficiency and effectiveness of **ACFODE** through periodic evaluation of its programs; and
- to build a documentation center well equipped with information about different social groups especially women in Uganda and other countries.

The committee is seeking to establish links with institutions involved in conducting research on women. The nature of these links may be in the form of exchange of publications, training of **ACFODE** members, joint research activities and general sharing of experiences in the areas of women in development.

The committee is currently chaired by Ms. Anne Katahoire, Senior Lecturer at the **Centre For Continuing Education (CCE)**, Makerere University. It is made up of members interested in conducting research on women. Some are trained researchers who help to train new members who have not conducted research before. The committee feels that there is a lot to learn through sharing of experiences with other organizations interested in, and involved in the same field.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Miria R.K. Matembe  
Chairperson, **ACFODE**  
P.O. Box 16729  
Kampala, Uganda

✉ *We want to strengthen our links with women's groups in Uganda and would like to exchange publications with your group and collaborate on other activities. - Editors.*

### **Sexual assault by a police officer**

---

Dear sisters,

I would like to address the subject of *sexual assault*. I was sexually assaulted in March 1992 by a police officer. My case was very mishandled from the beginning. There was no arrest made, yet this case was submitted to the grand jury. The accused was no-billed, due to lack of education of the grand jury. There was never an investigation. The assistant District Attorney agreed my case should be resubmitted to another grand jury only if I would take a polygraph test and pass it. The polygraph operator refused to polygraph me. He believed there was coercion and duress against me to take the test. Since there was no polygraph the case was dropped.

Why do the authorities urge victims to report this crime when the laws aren't being enforced and victims are denied their rights? After experiencing the unprofessional manner in which I was treated (and still being treated) I would think twice before reporting a sexual assault!

I believe when it comes to convicting a police officer, they are above the law! This is exactly what got the accused off. His CAREER! No one believed me, although I had evidence to prove the assault and to prove intent. The accused was fired but he was not fired for sexual assault. He was fired for breaking police policies before, during and after the sexual assault. There is nothing in his personnel file about this felony. He has regained employment elsewhere. Be cautious women! He was in uniform when this happened to me.

No woman deserves to have her body invaded and no victim deserves to be treated such as myself, my husband, and most of all my children. We are all victims.

Let's work on educating the legal system and courts.

From a determined survivor,

Lisa Shaw  
1906 Smith  
Waco, TX 76705  
USA

✉ *We commend your determination in bringing your case to court despite the lack of justice in the system. We hope that the publication of your letter will make other women take courage. It is difficult enough to deal with daily violence in our lives and continue to fight against it. It requires a lot of courage to share an experience of sexual assault when the law does not support the victim. We need to stand together in the struggle for justice for women and a fair system for all. - Editors.*

### **Australian women's research on health**

---

Dear sisters,

We are delighted to be part of your network. The **Australian Women's Research Centre** is very concerned with the issues of women's health, and both Dr. Renate Klein and I have done considerable work in the area of the new reproductive technologies. We are also currently working with a group called the **Centre For Philippine Concerns in Australia**. We are concerned about their long term welfare.

Since we are a new **Centre** we are still in the process of producing brochures. As soon as they are available we will post them on to you.

With best wishes to you, in sisterhood and solidarity,

Yours sincerely,

Robyn Rowland  
Director  
Australian Women's Research Centre  
Faculty of Humanities  
Deakin University, Greelong 3217  
Australia

✉ *Welcome to our network! We are sending you a copy of our quarterly magazine, **Women in Action**. We hope that you will continue sending us information about your Centre. - Editors.*

### **Middle East monitor of human rights**

---

Dearest friends,

**Middle East Watch**, a private, non-governmental human rights monitoring organization and the Women's Project of Human Rights Watch are conducting a joint project that we hope you might be able to help us with. We are looking at women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa and examining what sorts of restrictions they operate under. We want to document situations in which an individual or group has been silenced, punished, or in any other way had their

rights to free expression and association curtailed because of their work on women's rights. We want to look at what types of legal restrictions prevent many women from coming together and forming an association. We hope to contact by phone a number of these organizations to see if they are experiencing these troubles.

I am writing to you in hopes that you and your publication's resources may help me. I need assistance in obtaining the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of any women's associations. I understand that you have an extensive database and a copy of this would be most helpful. In addition, if you know of any recent incidents where women's organizations were in jeopardy of being banned or silenced due to their opinions, I would appreciate the information. Lastly, if you could please send me a copy of your journal and bill me accordingly, I would be most grateful.

In advance, I want to thank you for your help on this matter. If you have any questions, or would like to talk to me at length about this project, please call me at (212) 972-8400 or fax me at (212) 972-0905.

With kind regards,

Shiva Sooudi  
485 Fifth Avenue  
NY, NY 10017-610  
USA

✉ *We are sending you a copy of **Women in Action** with the subscription. We would be happy to assist you in obtaining addresses of women's organizations. Our Resource Center will get in touch with you on the database. - Editors.*



# Art and apartheid

Artist *Sanna Naidoo* has been involved in organizing women artists in South Africa to support each other and share ideas.

Many of the women are self-taught artists: mothers, grandmothers, ex-students and working women. "We paint and draw for different reasons. There are women painting for the sheer pleasure of having a hobby, some

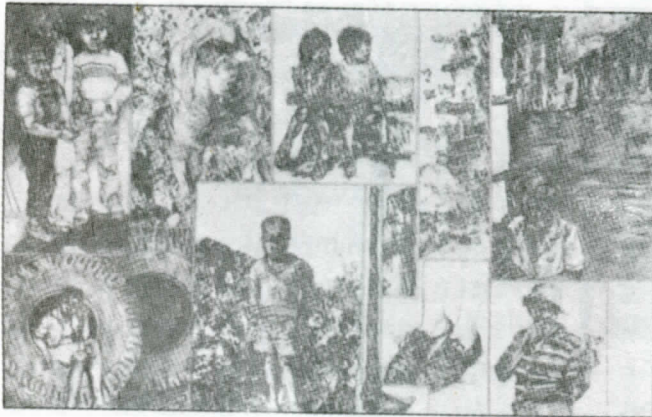
use art as therapy to get over depression and personal problems, to survive the trauma of detention."

Our works are a reflection of life under apartheid South Africa. Our artists use their art as a way to express the enormity of the struggles in South Africa. Our work tells of our life of equalities and abnormalities - above all, it tells of our life of

hopes, of a vision for a better tomorrow."

These artists have taken the responsibility of showing through art forms the country's struggle against apartheid. Art and apartheid are interwoven in their work.

**Source:** *SPEAK*, No. 41, July 1992, P.O. Box 261323, Excom 2023, South Africa.



Avi Soofal



Sanna Naidoo



Sherene Seedat

# Of women's lives and bodies

by Fionna Barber

A dozen women artists in Ireland set up the Women Artists Action Group, a network of North-South artists involved in visual arts. The women had a wide range of experience and background from painting, sculpture, photography and art history. Some women had children, some lived in the country, and others were town or city based.

Three of these women artists are Beth Ridgell, Una Walker and Delice Osborne.

Beth Ridgell's outstanding photographs dealt with the theme of woman's relation to nature. She used archetypes of the triple Goddess, virgin, mother and hag.

Una Walker works in a very different area, in what is known as installation work. This is similar to sculpture in that it is three dimensional, but different in that frequently the floor or surrounding walls are used as well.

Like Beth, Una Walker is concerned with the relationship between women and nature.

Delice Osborne's paintings are almost life size and focus on the different social roles open to men and women. One particularly striking example depicted the elderly writer Beatrix Potter standing at her cottage door smiling at the viewer: Instead of a window the wall of the house opens onto an inset of Neil Armstrong taking a 'giant step for mankind' on the surface of the moon. This painting is both very moving and haunting in its suggestion of the different worlds which women and men generally occupy.

Women frequently make art out of the circumstances of their everyday lives, fitting in painting with child care, often working on the corner of the kitchen table, although some are lucky enough to have a studio.

Often the materials they use have more 'female' associations, such as in the use of textiles and embroidery. From a very early age women are steered in this direction and it can be difficult to break out.

Not only do women artists need to develop their work in an atmosphere of support and constructive criticism from other women but as feminists they need to broaden the audience for women's art.

For many women not connected with art it is something mysterious and frequently meaningless, having little to do with everyday experience. Many feminist artists have begun to base their work in their experience of women's lives and women's bodies and the many different oppressions women face as women—not as men have seen and painted them for thousands of years. It is important to go on opening up access to women's art: every woman has a right to look, and voice her opinion about what she sees.

**Source:** *Women's News*, May 1987, 185 Upper Donegall Street, Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Detail from an installation:  
Harvest by Una Walker

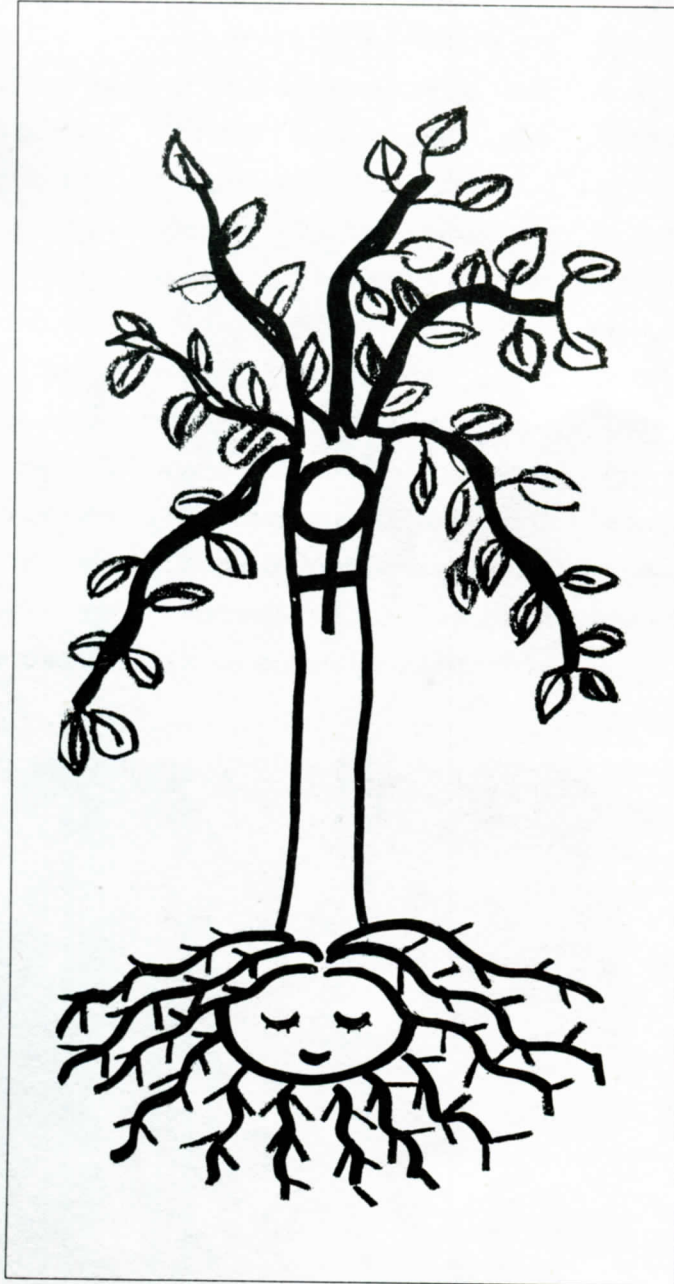
## Self-fulfillment through art

The Women's Art Group (WA Group) in Thailand was set up as a channel for women who want to express themselves through art.

The group plans to organize regular meetings where members can get together and discuss art, as well as exchange views on their work whether it is a simple drawing, a paper mache model or embroidery. The purpose is to encourage the women to work on what they enjoy doing and not to feel inhibited.

Two members, Sujinda Asawaicharm and Niramon Phruethathorn, journalists by profession, share their experiences.

Niramon asserts: "Our aim is not



to be professional but to have fun. Art is an excellent way of releasing stress. And some people will not even know that they have any artistic ability, until they experiment."

Apart from frames and T-shirts, the group also makes wooden earrings in the shape of the female genetic symbol.

"We would like to promote the symbol as a sign of solidarity for organizations to protect women's rights. The symbol is internationally known, but in Thailand it is not widely recognized," says Niramon.

**Source:** FOW Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 1, July 1991, Friends of Women, 1379/30 Soi Praditchai Pahonyotin Rd., Samsennai, Bangkok 10400 Thailand.

# Women's art: The awakening force

by Alice G. Guillermo

For women's art, it is the season of awakening, in preparation for the flourishing to come, when women's art will take its place as a new force in our environment. The exhibit of a group of women artists in the Philippines, *Kababaihan Para sa Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan (KASIBULAN)*, is a significant start towards this awakening.

Women's art takes various manifestations reflective of different concerns and orientation. It can, in fact, be divided into several categories.

First, there is women's art in the media traditionally associated with women, such as fiber art, including handwoven textiles, tapestries, even embroidery. These may either be traditional work done by women of the cultural communities or contemporary work done in these media with new designs, techniques, and contents. While it is true that textiles and fiber art, in general, were hitherto peripheral and outside the canons of art mainly because of male-dominated aesthetics, in recent times, with increasingly democratic and

feminist values in art, these art forms have been reevaluated and given their due importance.

Then there are art works by women but which lie outside feminist concerns. These works contribute to the artistic mainstream and may indeed win recognition. They are based, however, on the illusory premise of a politically neutral ground in which gender tensions do not exist and men and women freely compete in an open situation. Feminist consciousness does not enter here, as there is an absence of a critique of the prevail-



Brenda Fajardo

Elenita Ordonez



Sandra Torrijos



these roles are represented as natural and "in the order of things" rather than cultural and socially determined in a confusion of the natural and the cultural that calls for a demystifying process. However, in a feminist context, these roles are not rejected but are redefined and transformed in liberative terms. Nurturance, which includes mothering and childrearing, becomes a positive value through which woman voluntarily and in her own conditions participates in the human and social projects. Women's art which reflects this transformation moves from the feminine and biological to the feminist and sociopolitical.

Likewise, there is art by women which celebrate women. Paintings in this mode are done in a romantic idiom replete with flowers and nature. And their images primarily bring out ideals of beauty, often storybook ideals of beauty, calling to mind the slender and graceful heroines of fairy tales, such as Beauty and the Beast. Art Nouveau with its flowing curvilinear lines, its organic motifs, lends itself eminently to this mode. Paintings celebrate femininity in a kind of

ing patriarchal ideology which has consistently given more value, with its attendant opportunities and rewards, on the work of male artists and has correspondingly perpetuated social limitations for women artists.

These are likewise paintings by women foregoing feminine, though not feminist concerns. Often, their subjects are

women portraits or genre of women in daily life.

More importantly, they make use of traditional symbols and signs, referring to women's roles as wife and mother and the central events of marriage and childbirth. Some of these paintings reinforce the traditional roles of women by proffering stereotyped images in a closed universe. As such,

idealized essence derived largely from Western fantasies. Woman is decontextualized and abstracted from her status in the real world as peasant, worker, or middle class professional and becomes Woman with capital W, an eternal and universalizing idea bearing the totalizing impulse of the dominant occidental models. So that while woman is indeed celebrated, she is at the same time turned into a creature myth, ideal and inaccessible, ultimately contributing to the mystification of woman. In this context, she occupies a realm apart, and at worst becomes a decorative image or a significant cut off from its referent in the real world.

Then there are the paintings by women of women subjects which shows a heightened woman's consciousness of themselves. The crux here is that the representation of woman goes from external appearances into a psychological probing of consciousness. There is the important realization that woman in the past had usually been represented as objects, especially in relation to men in position on subjection to male dominance.

Veronica  
Lim-Yuyitung



Imelda Caijipe-Endaya

Emphasis has been placed on her external appearance, her beauty, grace, charm, etc., these traditional valuations which have been part of the packaging of women in art as consumer objects to answer male needs. For the feminist artist, it becomes

the question of how to represent women as Subject, self-reflective and self-determining, as well as an active and positive presence in the real world.

Along this line, there are paintings which espouse feminist issues, such as those which

have to do with the changing self-image, values, education, and the general projects of women's liberation. To be sure, these are not programmatic in tone, but have a conceptual complexity and refinement that belongs to a real work of art. Here, satire may come in, and in general, the protest against patriarchy may take the form of an artistic critique, subtle or sharp and biting, possibly in a strong expressionist vein. There are artists who may consistently focus on issues specific to women, but there are also a number who view women's issues as inextricably bound with larger social issues as woman actively engages in the process of finding her rightful place in society.

**About the author:** Alice G. Guillermo is known as the Philippines' premier art critic. She has authored several books on culture and the arts. She currently heads the Arts Studies Department of the University of the Philippines in Diliman.

**Source:** *Laya Feminist Quarterly* 2/92, *Laya Women's Collective*, P.O. Box 5396, Manila 1093 Philippines.



*Rosel Valenzuela*



*Chit Balmaceda*

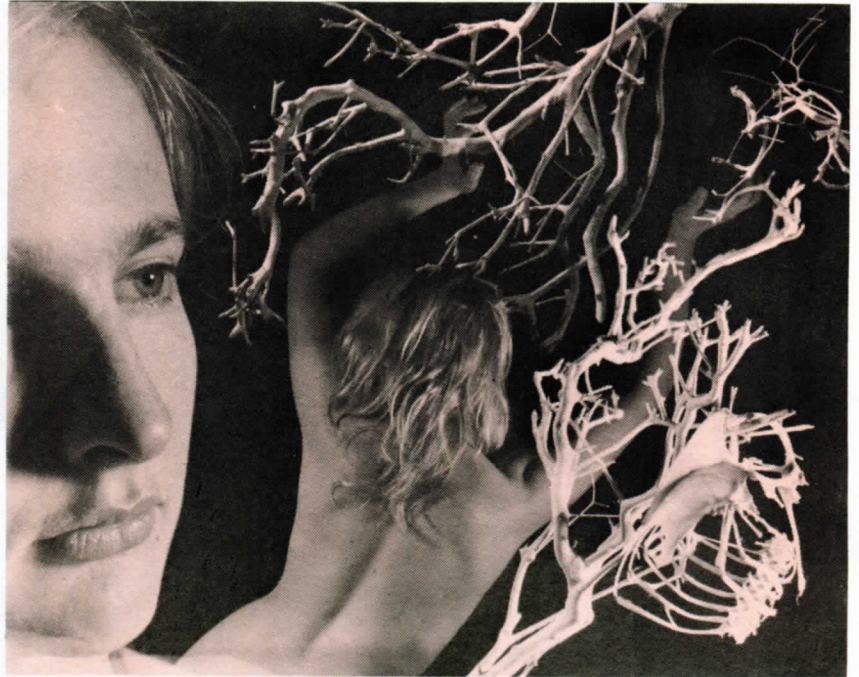
## **Julanne Morris: *Breaking free***

When I began working as a feminist artist, my work dealt with the image of woman as portrayed in Christian history and the contemporary mass media of the west. In the Christian tradition, ideas about body image seemed to be tied up in the virgin-mother-whore triad. I saw a great deal of destructive negative concepts arising from restrictive Christian morality causing pain to young women around me, and expressed this using symbolism in my work.

One set of restrictions and expectations imposed on women is that of the perfect body image. The commercially presented ideals of shape and size are unobtainable by the vast majority of women. The desirable measurements are unhealthy and unreasonable.

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**About the artist:** *Julanne Morris is a Diploma of Fine Arts photography honors student from New Zealand who has been working on her technique of photographing multiple images on one section of film.*





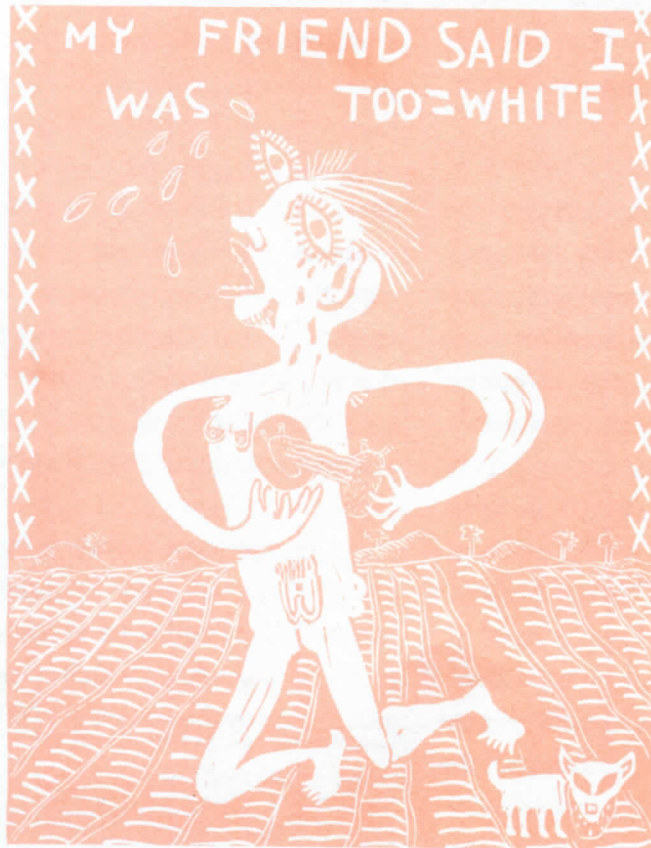
# Annalee Davis: Speaking a new language in art

Annalee Davis, a Barbadian artist, is committed to making her views known, and she is creating a new visual language to achieve this.

Davis' work explores and challenges perceptions concerning race, class and gender. Many of her themes are universal - sexual harassment, segregation, alienation, prejudice and stereotyping. But she places these within a Caribbean context.

One of her works, *My friend said I was too white*, reflects the anguish of the commonly held stereotype, that Barbadian whites have nothing to contribute outside of economics. But this is not true, Davis insists.

Perhaps the most controversial in her work is her treatment of nude figures, the ex-



posed genitalia. She examines the woman as part virgin, part whore, the Queen of Heaven and the downfall of man, divided and condemned by her own sexuality. Man on the other hand is identified and glorified by his sexuality.

Davis believes she has a message to deliver, and explains that she is trying to develop a language.

"It's important that we don't always borrow a language

from somewhere else. We need to have enough faith in ourselves to create a language that can define who we are and set trends outside of Barbados, and the Caribbean, that we don't always have people coming in to define who we are for us," she said.

---

**Source:** *Sistren*, Vol. 13, Nos. 2 & 3 1991, 20 Kensington Crescent, Kingston 5, Jamaica, West Indies.

# Ratna Roy reclaims *devdasi* through classical Indian dance

by Sunera Thobani

Ratna Roy portrays the multi-faceted reality of women's lives by addressing issues of social justice, particularly those concerning the oppression of women through classical dance. With innovative choreography and her commitment to women, Ratna wins the respect of both art lovers and social activists wherever she performs. Her choreography of the dowry death dance is one of the most powerful indictments of the dowry system in art form.

Dance as art form was developed by women in a matrilineal tradition. However with the rise of patriarchal relations and colonization, dance was taken out of women's hands. Ratna's commitment to reclaiming this tradition, and her insistence on portraying the power women have within themselves, is a source of inspiration for all women.

The *mahari* tradition in dance - the *devdasi* tradition in Orissa is part of a matrilineal, Tantric tradition in India. One of its central tenets is the worship of the Devi, the great god-

dess. This tradition is female-centered and does not recognize the divisions of caste. It celebrates sexuality as a form of realization of divinity, recognizing that the spiritual power of women is stronger than that of men.

This goddess-worshipping tradition is much older than the patriarchal caste-based system of the Vedic Age, which was introduced by the Aryans in 1700

AD-500 BC. It is this matrilineal tradition - the independence of women who have control over their bodies, their sexuality, and their property, which is at the heart of Ratna's work. As she says, "The *devdasi* tradition is a Tantric tradition, and all my dances are in this tradition."

*Devdasi* were originally accomplished, respected women. Around 2 AD, the *Smiriti* writers of the sacred law clearly defined



good women as women that men would marry and *other women* as those who had dealings with men but whom no men could marry. Dancers were among these *other women*. They were respected, their knowledge and learning was recognized, their political advice was sought, and their status was valued.

The *devdasi* owned land, would learn to read and write, unlike other women, and their funeral rites were carried out by their daughters. Their male chil-

to be taken into account. Some women received jewels and so on, from males, without engaging in sexual relations with them. Others did engage in sexual relations."

Ratna says it's important to her to continue the tradition of the dance in the old style and that all her performances have female lead characters. It is very difficult to make a woman-statement if the choreography does not reflect the complexity of being a woman.

reclaiming and elevating women, we have to reclaim and elevate the body.

"What has happened with me is that even though I dance on stage, a lot of the time I am isolated, in my own private world, in my prayer, in my despair and sorrow, or in my joy in being a woman. So I use training to express myself as a woman."

In keeping with the tradition of the dance, Ratna prepares for her performance in the old ways. "I prepare for the dance in a ritualistic way. The ornaments I wear came down from the *devdasi*. I also fast before every performance. All of my music is original music for the particular dances I do." A gifted performer and a respected teacher, Ratna continues to reclaim both the history and the dance of the *devdasi* tradition.

**About the author:** *Sunera Thobani is a founding member of the South Asian Women's Action Network, (SAWAN), a feminist collective based in Vancouver and a regular contributor to Kinesis.*

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*Excerpt taken from article in Kinesis, September 1992, Vancouver Status Of Women, 301-1720 Grant Street, Vancouver BC V5L 2Y6, Canada.*

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**"Reclaiming the dance in the *devdasi* tradition is one of the most important issues facing dance today, because they were strong women, politically, socially, and intellectually."**

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dren had to work their land in order to earn their keep, or do other kinds of work, because the land and property belonged to their daughters.

When patriarchal relations arose and marriage became important, that is when these women's independence was a threat. The central issue was that she owned her body--no man owned it!

"The word prostitution needs to be defined because, if extramarital sex is prostitution then they were prostitutes. Otherwise each individual case has

"Reclaiming the dance in the *devdasi* tradition is one of the most important issues facing dance today," says Ratna, "because they were strong women, politically, socially, and intellectually. Dance is a living tradition; it is a language. It is essential that we redefine what womanhood is and depict it in this tradition. It is important to show women who are weak and abused in society, as well as to show women who are defiant and strong. It is important to acknowledge that sexuality is not sin. In the process of

## Theater from a woman's point of view: Glen Norah Women's Theater Group



The Glen Norah Women's Theater Group was recently launched in Harare, Zimbabwe.

A member of the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theater, the group is a result of the Women in Theatre Conference held in 1990 at the University of Zimbabwe and attended by women theater artists from Jamaica, Zambia, Botswana, Tan-

zania, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Created mainly as a fulltime women's group, the Glen Norah Women's Theater Group aims at using theater to articulate various women's issues especially those which touch on the role of women in the country's socioeconomic development.

The formation of the group is an important event in the history of theater in Zimbabwe. Up until now most theater groups were headed by men and their attempts to include women's issues in their plays, always take a man's point of view. For example, an AIDS play normally shows the man as an "AIDS victim" (he gets it from women).

He is the central character. His wife, girlfriend, etc. and their problems are of secondary importance. The Glen Norah Women's Theater Group intends to show women's problems, and issues from a woman's point of view.

In collectively creating the play *Who is to Blame*, the theatre group worked with members of Just for Women which is another Harare based women's theatre group. *Who is to Blame* is a play about unemployed women in Zimbabwe. It traces the life of a rural girl from her studies to employment. Her friend's brother tries to rape her as payment for assisting her find a job. She ends up a prostitute. In the end, she leads the women out of prostitution into forming a cooperative where they are able to use their performing arts talent to earn a decent living. *Who is to Blame* uses traditional music and dances in an approach that tries successfully to involve the audience.

Glen Norah Women's Theater Group has scheduled performance tours in Zimbabwe and Botswana. The group plans to hold theatre workshops for women especially in teacher training colleges. It is working on a play on AIDS from a woman's perspective. The aim is to create a play where the audience is encouraged to understand how to handle AIDS pa-

tients and how those who are HIV positive can face the future.

Another theme the group plans to explore is that of cooperatives and exploring some causes of their failure.

**Source:** *SPEAK OUT/Taurail Khulumani, No. 19 1992, Women's Action Group (WAG), P.O. Box 135, Harare, Zimbabwe*



# Drama in problem solving: Sistren Theater Collective

by Robert Wallstrom and Elayair McIntosh

Sistren which means *sister* is the only theater company in the Caribbean that has developed from the initiative of working class women. Drawing on personal ghetto experiences, Sistren writes and performs plays that make audiences more aware of the problem that women face, particularly in this part of the world.

The women of Sistren came together in 1977. Their first theater piece, *Downpression Get a Blow*, dealt with women in a garment factory forming a union and achieving their demands.

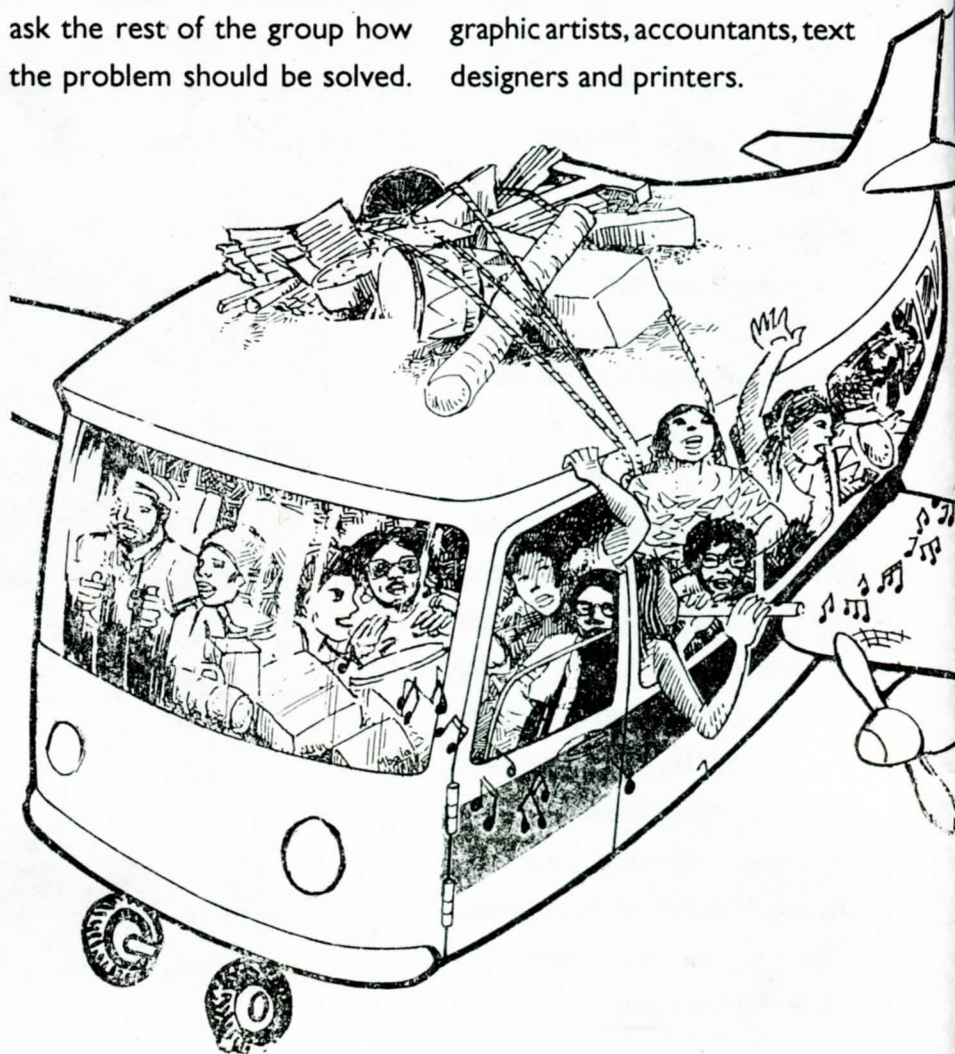
From that performance, Sistren was born. The women decided to stay together and make more theater pieces. Sistren's first major production was *Bellywoman Bangarang* in 1978.

Sistren's informal learning process was reinforced later by various research workshops. Calisthenics were developed based on the alphabet; a dance

was choreographed to spell out words. Writing exercises were linked to problem-solving skits involving conflict resolution, personal awareness, and group development. Some of the women would develop a skit on a particular problem, stop, then ask the rest of the group how the problem should be solved.

After discussion, the solution was acted out. The desire to create theater increased the desire to master skills.

Sistren's members have had to learn to be not only actresses, but also teachers, stage managers, secretaries, graphic artists, accountants, text designers and printers.



A textile project has been started, and members have been trained in stencil-cutting and silk-screening to make bags, aprons, and other objects to sell at crafts fairs and at acting performances. Sistren T-shirts and wall hangings are also printed, depicting themes from the company's major theater productions. This craftwork not only supplements individual income, it helps support the aims of the collective.

Since Sistren has a cooperative structure, each member helps evaluate everyone's work. The group comprises not just actresses and an artistic director. There are also resource people, behind-the-scenes members who help with the administration, fundraising, and publicity. After six years of working together, Sistren has envisioned four main objectives. These are to:

- \* perform drama in working class communities,
- \* create theater and drama

that comment on the position of women,

- \* look at possible solutions to the problems of women in their day-to-day struggle,
- \* provide members of their collective with the chance to participate in a self-reliant cooperative organization.

To accomplish these objectives, Sistren mounts major commercial productions which develop themes that challenge and stimulate questions about the situation of women. The collective also conducts public workshops where drama is used as a problem-solving tool. Although these workshops are often free, they are as important as larger theatrical productions. Performed in prisons, community centers, and remote villages, these skits apply what has been learned in Sistren's research workshops. A sense of community is created so that an audience can be exposed to and deal with hidden or taboo sub-

jects about women. The open-ended skits do not passively reflect life; they try to demystify it by fully exploring its realities. By facing what has been considered indecent or merely irrelevant, the actresses record women's rejection of the forces that thwart their lives.

Although grounded in the experience of their members Sistren tries to explore the experience of all women. The subjects of plays are thoroughly researched, but sometimes community workshops turn up new information and themes -- in meetings with women from factories to schools, from sugar workers to the urban unemployed.

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**Source:** *Women In The Rebel Tradition: The English-Speaking Caribbean, Women's International Resource Exchange (WIRE) 2700 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10025 USA.*

# Tehrik-e-Niswan Theater Group: Alternative theater for women's development

by Khalid Ahmad



Tehrik-e-Niswan is a theater group which stages plays that highlight and underscore the plight of women. In the last 10 years Tehrik-e-Niswan had more than 90 performances of 20 different productions. It became the cultural wing of the women's movement in Pakistan.

Tehrik-e-Niswan felt that the first step in the attainment of women's rights must be the comprehension and understanding of their problems and bringing about an awareness of these rights. We found theater the most effective medium for spreading our message. In a society which is largely illiterate and where access to formal education is extremely restricted, theater can reach a wider audience.

Tehrik-e-Niswan sets out to do consciousness raising plays with an emphasis on women's problems with two specific audiences: middle class women through proscenium theater and low income women through mobile theater.

In our society, middle class women are forced to stay at home; there are taboos against women working and their education is discouraged. They are denied any kind of independence. Given the conservatism of attitude towards women in middle class areas, our plays attempt to question these attitudes.

The second kind of work we do is in the low-income areas, mainly in and around Karachi, and occasionally in rural areas. Here the

audience is largely drawn either from the industrial workers or those in various service sectors. This is a largely illiterate audience. The performances are free and of shorter duration. They draw their material from the problems faced by people in these areas. The productions are simple and do not require elaborate sets, lighting or costumes.

In order to introduce theater as a tool for community work and promote its use for development purposes, we have recently

held some workshops for rural and urban community workers. The main purpose of these workshops is to show community workers how they could develop plays drawn from their own lives and communities.

We believe that only through meaningful cultural work can a people be truly transformed, educated and made aware and self reliant.

**About the author:** Khalid Ahmad is an actor, director and writer for Tehrik-e-Niswan. The article was based on the paper presented during the "Seminar on Alternative Media" in Singapore from 16-19 March 1993 sponsored by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center and the World Association for Christian Communication.



# Women change the picture

Mpumi Phoswa and Yoyo Modise of Film and Allied Worker's Organization Community Video School (FAWO CVS) are the only two women in a class of 12 film students.

For Mpumi and Yoyo training to be film makers breaks the stereotype of "the woman's place is in the home". Yoyo enjoys the idea of breaking through barriers. She feels it is important for women to become film makers because women know best what their role in society is. Film scripts are usually written by men. In most films women are there only for their looks and not for their personality or the work they do. There is a need to see different images of women in film. Women must not be seen as inferior to men. That is an im-

portant message women can bring into films. That is why it is important for women to become film makers.

According to Mpumi, film is a very powerful medium. Women need to change their image in films.

Mpumi knew that it would be a challenge to enter training school. She got tired of seeing all men in film credits. "It was always Van der Merwe - director, Van der Merwe - writer, Van der Merwe - camera." The South African movie industry is controlled by white men. There are few black film makers, even fewer black women. The struggles Mpumi and Yoyo have faced in class is good practice for what they will face in the industry.

The FAWO CVS was set up in 1991 to give people in black communities the opportunity to learn how to make films and videos. The school aims to empower young black people with technical skills to

tell stories through film, about experiences and issues in their communities. It runs a two year full-time program and wants to increase the number of women in its courses.

FAWO CVS can be contacted at FAWO, P.O. Box 16399, Doornfontein 2028, Johannesburg. Tel. no.: (011) 4024570/1, Fax: (011) 4020777.

(Material for the article was taken from an interview of the two women by Bobby Rodwell.)

**Source:** *SPEAK*, June 1992, P.O. Box 261363, Excom 2023, South Africa.



## Magic of sewing stories: *Arpilleras* of Latin America

One of the more traditional forms of cultural expressions of women in Latin America is the *arpillera*. Women work their magic to create stories with bits of cloth, needle and thread.

In Chile, the *arpilleras* are small wall hangings with figures superimposed on the cloth to create scenes full of vitality and movement which serve as political statements. *Arpillera* means burlap in Spanish and since the backing cloth is often of burlaps or other feed or grain sacks, the finished work has come to be called *arpillera*.

Making *arpilleras* is not just a means of earning income, it is also an outlet for the woman's feelings, a means of social, artistic, metaphorical and political expression.

The *arpilleristas* are also involved in the political realities of their life and their country as expressed with truth and fidelity in the *arpilleras*.

The themes vary. Some recurring ones are the Andes,



Each *arpillera* is a small scene from the life of the woman who creates it. Just as women's lives have been torn to pieces, the *arpilleras* also consist of scraps of leftover materials put together slowly and in sorrow.

the neighborhood, the houses, signs of those missing, either disappeared or in exile, illustrations of the pick up work the women do to earn a little money, working as street sweepers, washing clothes, working as maids.

The *arpilleras* often show the health center, the child feeding centers, the closed school,

lack of water and light, the church and dreams of a better future.

The *arpilleristas* provide a vision of the world that brings a message of peace and hope.

**Source:** *Scraps of Life, Chilean Arpilleras*, Marjorie Agosin, translated by Cola Franzen. Zed books, London, UK, 1987.

# Customs, culture and campaigns through the *Khanga*

by Nasra M. Hilal

*Khanga* is very popular clothing material in Africa and serves many purposes. It is made up of six pieces of cloth as big as handkerchiefs and joined into a four sided pattern. It embodies many things for the woman such as art, beauty, culture and customs as well as politics and the professions. It has enjoyed a special status in the traditional and customary ways of coastal women, but it is also part of their day to day life.

The demand, value, and prestige for *Khanga* has increased. Traditionally it is used in many different ways during death, wedding and religious ceremonies.

During weddings, the bride puts on a special design of *Khanga* as *Kisutu*. Girls and boys are given their own pairs when they reach their rites of passage (*somo*). As part of women's customs, they get their *Khanga* on the first day of their period.

In some instances two women may appear at a gathering wearing the same design of

*Khanga* to symbolize their friendship.

*Khanga* is an educational and communication tool which has brought about peace as well as emnity within the same social fabric. When women are divorced a pair of *Khanga* is left for their former husbands. The pair which is left behind is intended for the women of the next marriage.

*Khanga* has also been used as part of health campaigns. Designs and messages appear on the *Khanga*. It is a good medium of communication for enlightening other women because it can carry many different messages.

**Source:** *Sauti Ya Siti*, June 1989, TAMWA, P.O. Box 6143, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.



## Warli art: Paintings on mud walls

The Warlis are a group of Adivasis, the original inhabitants of India. They are mentioned in the earliest legends and stories over 4,500 years ago.

Although nature in the form of tropical forests is bountiful, the Warlis use their products sparingly. They extract just enough for their sustenance, apparently aware that over-exploitation can only result in their own destruction. Their homes are simple structures of mud,

sticks and thatches, using recyclable materials only, appropriate to the climate. Their cattle are housed in the same space and the hut is always spotlessly clean.

Though they are often on the borderline of subsistence, they have a remarkable attitude of not worrying about tomorrow. Their enjoyment is expressed in song and dance, with the *tarpa*, made from a dried gourd, a favorite musical instru-

ment.

An important tradition of the Warlis is the painting on the mud walls of their huts of the Goddess Palghat. The painting, known as the *chawk*, is done with rice flour and plays an important part in their marriage ceremony. The Goddess is depicted with Panchshiriya, her consort, and is surrounded with an ornamental frame and other objects. It is from this tradition that their art has developed.



**Life as art.** Ploughing and sowing, harvesting and threshing, collecting firewood and cooking, drawing water from a well, basket, pottery and their implements, tigers, monkeys, birds of the forest, down to the smallest creatures.

# When women are friends

by Nepeti

*She is no blood-relation  
nor a far-off cousin*

*She is neither an aunt nor lover  
She is just a plain best friend.*

*She is not rich*

*She is no royal*

*She is no top-class cat*

*But she is so loyal.*

*She is the pillar to lean on*

*When things go wrong*

*She is the partner to jump with*

*When things go well.*

*She is the person you need*

*When you have something to tell*

*She is the person who makes  
an evening-out complete.*

*She is the person to dissect with,  
a book or play*

*She is the person you call  
to watch TV.*

*She is the person you share the shower with,  
without inhibition or shame*

*She is the person who will plait your hair  
every Sunday afternoon.*

*She is the one who picks your outfit  
for the important date*

*And throws in all the tips,  
because it is important to her  
that things go well for you.*

*She is the first to know you fall  
in love*

*She is the one to run to*

*When a love affair runs sour.*

*She is the person who  
stands in for you*

*When you told a lie at home  
And agrees with you  
how unreasonable parents are.*

*She is the one who knows  
all your inner secrets  
and would never volunteer  
them to someone  
or threaten to tell.*

*She is the one who accepts  
when you are not calling for a while  
because you have found a new lover  
And will secretly hope  
that it works out for better this time.*

*She is the one who will be there  
when you get married  
And assure you  
that you are making the right move.  
She will be there when  
you get your first baby  
She will be around until it is old  
enough to call her aunt.*

*She will be there  
when you are both  
grey-haired and bent-over.  
You will share with her old memories  
Sometimes without uttering a word,  
Because by then you won't need  
words to communicate,  
Because you would have been  
The best of women friends.*

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**Source:** Sister Namibia, Vol. 4, No. 1 1992,  
Sister Collective, P.O. Box 60100, Katutura  
9000 Namibia.

# Nushu: Discourse of resistance

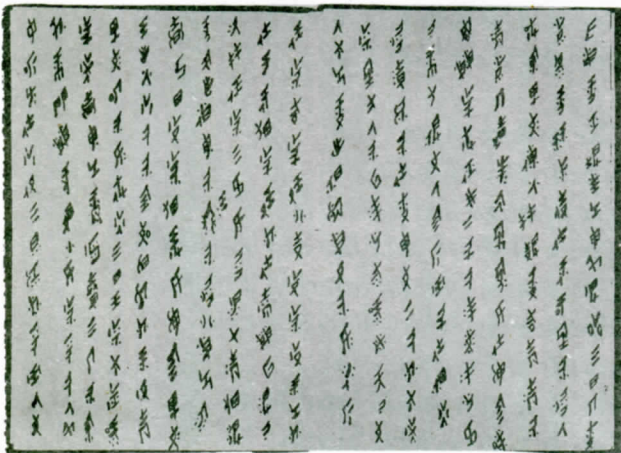
by Cathy Silber

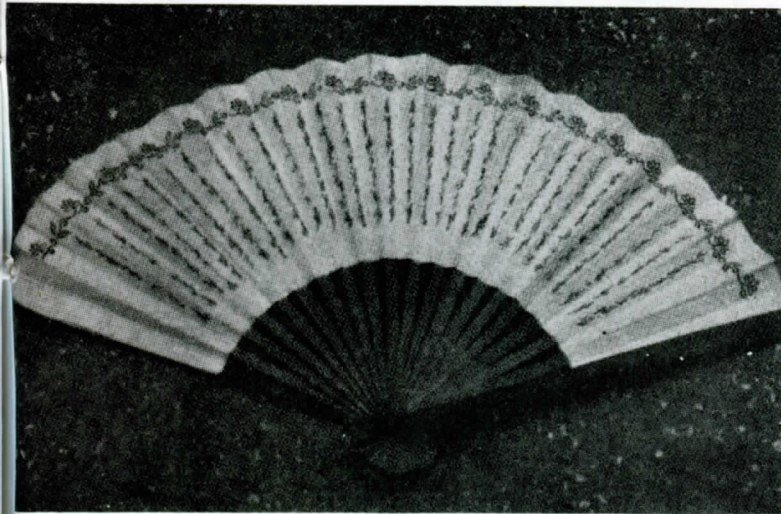


Generations of women in one small part of southwestern Hunan Province in China wrote in *nushu*, the women's script -- a writing system used solely by women. In the rice farming villages of Shangjiangxu Township in Jiangyong County, a thriving women's literary culture was so much a part of everyday life that local people called the standard Chinese script *nanzi* (men's words). With their own script and an exclusively female audience, the women of Shangjiangxu had both the power and the freedom to write the truths of their own lives.

Generally denied access to an education in *nanzi*, they were spared indoctrination in the textual tradition that subordinated them. Nor did they have to agonize over making their truths palatable to men. Yet because they were not written in men's words, nothing they wrote would revise the dominant textual tradition in the slightest. But these women maneuvered within social constraints in immediate, daily ways, forming in the process social networks of emotional and sometimes economic support in which they could voice their objections to the inequities and pain of their lives.

The women's script was used for nearly a thousand years. In its heyday, women gathered over tasks of needle and thread, upstairs in warm months, or around the kitchen fire in winter and





took turns singing from works in their script. Not every woman could write the script, but many could read *nushu*, and still more knew several works by heart.

With the social changes brought by the 1949 revolution, younger women no longer learned *nushu*. As the older generation of writers died, *nushu* died with them. Because women customarily had their favorite writings burned or buried with them at death so as to enjoy them in the afterlife, no texts dating before the late nineteenth century survive. Many of the extant writings - about 200 - belong to this century. Written in verse on paper, cloth, and fans, they include women's autobiographies, vows of sworn sisterhood, letters of condolence or recrimination, books for brides, accounts of local and

national events, prayers, a Confucian instruction manual for girls, and rendition of tales popular throughout China.

*Nushu* was a discourse of resistance: its writers risked the same threats of physical violence that existed for other Chinese women who confronted the inequities of society.

Denied a place in the history of men, the women of Shangjiangxu wrote their own history, recorded their own knowledge, made themselves central in a literary tradition passed on from mother to daughter for centuries.

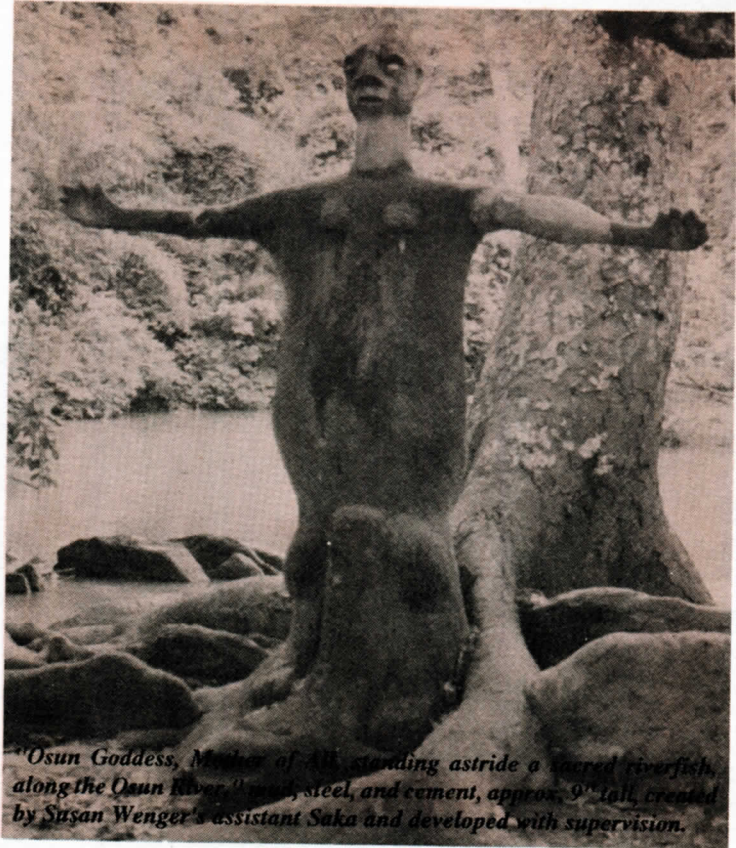
**Source:** *Ms. Magazine*, Vol. III, No. 2, September/October 1992, PO Box 57131 Boulder, Colorado 80322-7131 USA.



**GODDESSES**

*Living in a forest  
I am wrapt round by goddesses.  
Lifting their arms and their hair  
they spin soft green whispers,  
speaking to each other  
and to me in the morning.*

by Carol Atkins



*"Osun Goddess, Mother of All, standing astride a sacred river fish, along the Ogun River. Iron, steel, and cement, approx. 9' tall, created by Susan Wenger's assistant Saka and developed with supervision.*



*"Tomorrow" from "Impressions of Latin America" series, 54" x 68", 1985 Betty LaBake. (Photo by D.R. Smith.)*

**RELEASE**

*I surrender my power to the wind  
for it moves through me, and opens me  
I surrender my mind to the sky  
and release the need to feel  
ownership.  
I am not I, but sky  
woman, more, the dancer  
of visions  
unowned.*

by Mari E. Reinke



**LEGACY**

*for Anastasia Jean*

*'Anything handed  
down from, or as  
from an ancestor  
to a descendant.'*

*Prologue*

*There are those who think  
or perhaps don't think  
that children and lesbians  
together can't make a family  
that we create an extension  
of perversion.*

*They think  
or perhaps don't think  
that we have different relationships  
with our children  
that instead of getting up  
in the middle of the night  
for a 2 AM and 6 AM feeding  
we rise up and chant  
'you're gonna be a dyke  
you're gonna be a dyke.'*

*That we feed our children  
lavender Similac  
and by breathing our air  
the children's genitals distort  
and they become hermaphrodites.*

*They ask  
'What will you say to them  
what will you teach them?'*

*Child  
that would be mine  
I bring you my world  
and bid it be yours.*

by Pat Parker

Detail of  
the Amazon Series.  
life-cast  
in colored  
porcelains,  
by Mary Ann Fariello.  
1985.  
Photo by Meryl Truett.  
*The scorpion is an image  
of women's powers of  
transformation.*



# Audre Lorde -- 1934-1992



Photo by Leigh Mosley

Audre Lorde often identified herself as a Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother. A prolific author and activist, she wrote groundbreaking poems and essays on racial identity, political consciousness and connections between Afro-European, Afro-Asian, and Afro-American women whom she called “the hyphenated people.” She was the daughter of Grenadian parents.

Her work carried themes of the need for love and commitment in our lives, interconnectedness,

**“Poetry Is Not a Luxury,”** in *Sister/Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, p.37; first published in *Chrysalis* in 1977.

*For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.*

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,”** delivered at the Modern Language Association, Chicago, December 1977,

published in *Sister/Outsider*, pp.40-41.

*I have to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. The speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive. Less than two months ago I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the*

*agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.*

*In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end.*

*I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had*

***"My silences had not protected me.  
Your silences will not protect you."***

difference as a creative force, the South African struggle, the beauty and love of women, the pain and compassion of Black mothers and the encouragement of the voices of lesbians and women of color.

Lorde published nine volumes of poetry and five of prose, and contributed writings to numerous periodicals and anthologies. Her works have been translated into many languages. They include: *The Black Unicorn*, *Sister Outsider*, *Zami*:

*A New Spelling of My Name*, *Coal between Ourselves*, *The Cancer Journals*, *A Burst of Light* and *Undersong*.

She taught college students, organized among women of color, and politicized audiences with her poetry readings. In 1980, she helped found Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. She lived the last years of her life in St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

On November 17, 1992 Audre Lorde died after a long term bout with cancer.

ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.

### **Sister/Outsider**

Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.

There are many kinds of

power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

### **A Burst of Light, Firebrand Books, 1988, p.130.**

For me, living fully means living with maximum access to my expe-

rience and power, loving, and doing work in which I believe. It means writing my poems, telling mystories, and speaking out of my most urgent concerns and against the many forms of anti-life that surround us.

I wish to live whatever life I have as fully and as sweetly as possible, rather than refocus that life solely upon extending it for some unspecified time. I consider this a political decision as well as life-saving one, and it is a decision that I am fortunate to be able to make.

If one Black woman I do not know gains hope and strength from my story, then it has been worth the difficulty of telling.

## Meet

by Audre Lorde

Woman when we met on the solstice  
high over halfway between your world and mine  
rimmed with full moon and no more excuses  
your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you  
tasting your ruff down to sweetness  
and I forgot to tell you  
I have heard you calling across this land  
in my blood before meeting  
and I greet you again  
on the beaches in mines lying platforms  
in trees full of tail-tail birds flicking  
and deep in your caves of decomposed granite  
even over my own laterite hills  
after a long journey  
licking your sons  
while you wrinkle your nose at the stench.

Coming to rest  
in open mirrors of your demanded body  
I will be black light as you lie against me  
I will be heavy as August over your hair  
our rivers flow from the same sea  
and I promise to leave you again  
full of amazement and our illuminations  
dealt through the short tongues of color  
or the taste of each other's skin when it hung  
from our childhood mouths.

When we meet again  
will you put your hands upon me  
will I ride you over our lands  
will we sleep beneath trees in the rain?  
You shall get young as I lick your stomach  
hot and at rest before we move off again



you will be white fury in my navel  
I will be sweeping night  
Mawulisa foretells our bodies  
as our hands touch and learn  
from each others hurt.  
Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and  
Ouagadougou  
in Tema's bright port while the priestess of  
Larteh protects us  
in the high meat stalls of Palmyra and Abomey-  
Calavi  
now you are my child and my mother  
we have always been sisters in pain.  
Come in the curve of the Lion's bulging stomach  
lie for a season out of the judging rain  
we have mated we have cubbed  
we have high time for work and another meeting  
women exchanging blood  
in the innermost rooms of moment  
we must taste of each other's fruit  
at least once  
before we shall both be slain.

---

Meet was first printed in **Sinister Wisdom**, #3, 1977 and reprinted in **The Black Unicorn** (1978, W.W. Norton, N.Y., U.S.A.)

**Women artists, collectives**

**ABHIVYAKTI**  
*Media for Development*  
Sushila Bungalow  
Canada Corner  
Nashik 422 005 India

**Jumani Foundation**  
63, Tahkorbai Towers  
Veer Kinarwala Marg  
Ahmedabad 380 006 India

**Tehrik-e-Niswan Theater Group**  
50-B Khayaban-e-Shaheen  
Defence Housing Authority, Phase 5  
Karachi, Pakistan

**Kamalapina (Women in Media  
Theater Collective)**  
89 Kapiligan St.,  
Araneta Subdivision  
Quezon City, Philippines

**Women and Media Collective**  
5 Jayarante Ave.  
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka

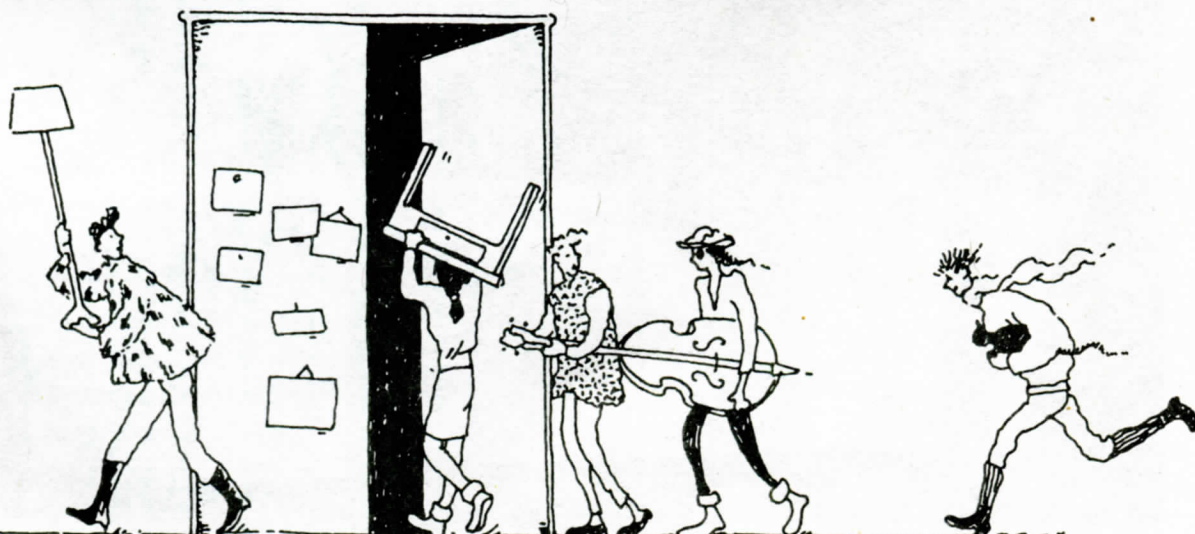
**Sistren Theatre Collective**  
20 Kensington Crescent  
Kingston 5, Jamaica

**Women in Music**  
Battersea Arts Center  
Lavender Hill  
London SW11 5TF England

**Federation of African Media Women**  
c/o 83 Montgomery Rd.  
Highlands, Harare, Zimbabwe

**Women in Theater**  
MacDonald Hall, Mzilikazi  
Box 2034, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

**Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW)**  
c/o 219 Fife Ave.  
Harare, Zimbabwe



**Lesbia**



## Indigenous women of Asia: When hearts, minds and spirits unite

by Eilleen Meneses

Indigenous women from the Lahu hill tribe of Thailand, Orang Asli of Malaysia, Dalit of India, Dayak of Indonesia, Ainu of Japan, Atayal-Seediq of Taiwan, Karen of Burma, Jumma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh), tribal women from Nagaland (India), West Papua (Indonesia), Korea, Sabah, and Vietnam and from the Philippines, Igorot women of the Cordillera, the Lumads and Muslims of Mindanao, the Mangyans, Aetas and Agta tribes.

*We work on native soil  
Feel the sweat from our toil  
With the power of our hand  
We feed the people of the land*



The first Asian Indigenous Women's Conference, held in Baguio City, northern Philippines, opened with a festive celebration – a colorful parade of indigenous women dressed in their traditional garbs of brilliant hues and handwoven stripes and prints.

### Land as a source of life

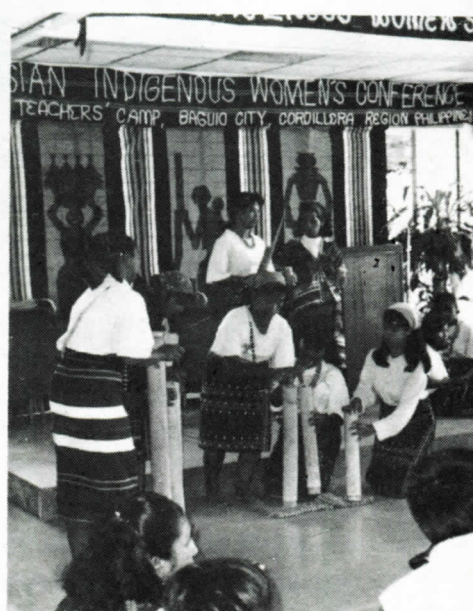
Land is the common bond that links together the indigenous peoples. For them, land is not just a commodity to be appropriated. Land is the very source of life. And it is the indigenous women who nurture the land to give sustenance to life.

"Our history as peoples basically revolve around our attempts to protect our ancestral homelands from incursions and destructions," stated Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center (CWERC).

In West Papua, for instance, all the land is by tradition community-owned. Describes a Papuan woman Jojo Roemadas, "We are afraid of losing our culture, our identity, our dignity just as we are losing our land and all the forests and the seas." In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in southeast Bangladesh, the Jumma village women live in constant fear. They can no longer wear their traditional dress, forced to hide their indigenous identity for their own safety.

### Violence against women

"Rape and assault against women is being used as a vehicle to suppress, even extinguish, the unique culture and identity of our indigenous peoples. The oppression faced by indigenous women is not just a physical act of violence but a threat to their cultural practice," said Kabita Chakma, tracing her roots to the Chakma tribe of the Jummas.





The indigenous women from the Philippines agreed that women are uniquely victimized by state violence.

In Thailand, the rich meanings of their cultural expressions and ceremonies slip away as these are turned into tourist attractions. The indigenous peoples themselves are being used as a tourist attraction.

Prostitution has grown to be a major tourist attraction in Thailand. Junejira Suknaphasawat, a youthful Lahu hilltribe woman from Thailand, thus revealed: "Many tourists come to the villages to smoke opium, inject heroin, and have sex with young women."

*We are the sisters, wives and mothers  
We provide the care for others  
From the womb we are begotten,  
Generations of our children;*

Junejira told the group about how the indigenous women in her country become victims of sex trafficking. Young hilltribe women fall prey to Thai recruiters who promise good jobs in the city.

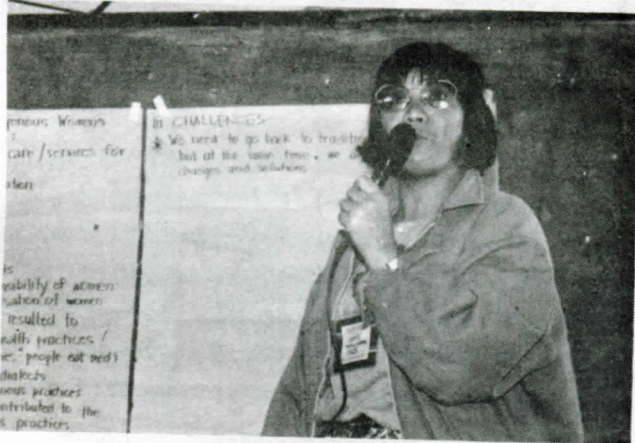
#### **Women's actions**

Junejira's work at the New Life Center in Thailand gives her the chance to help her indigenous sisters to become literate, to find



economic alternatives for their lives and to cope with the trauma they have experienced of being forced into prostitution.

In Burma, the Karen indigenous peoples suffer untold miseries under the military junta. Women and children suffer the most. In response, the Karen women have organized to alleviate their lot. The Karen Women's Association (KWO) was established to help women and children in health care, education, and cultural programs.



*Lest our cultures be forgotten  
Bequeath our values to our children,  
Teach them what is right and wrong...  
Sons and daughters proud and strong*

Indigenous women, as life bearers, play a key role in passing on the indigenous way of life to the future generation. "We, as life givers, are the ones who keep the families and the clans alive," said Jojo Roemadas, who founded the women's self-help group Keloupok Kerja Wanita di Irian Jaya (West Papua).

Papuan women teach their children to respect and take pride in their indigenous identity and roots.



### Restrictive religious customs

In Sabah, indigenous women occupied leadership roles, headed religious ceremonies and performed rituals to pay respect to the spirits. With the entry of male-dominated religions like Christianity and Islam, women lost these important roles. Winnie Joannes, a delegate of Partners of Community Organizations in Sabah, (PACOS) lamented that religion, has reinforced the inferior and subordinate position of women in society. "From birth, our position is lower than that of men, being dominated by our fathers and husbands. This justifies the control over us through customs, religion, social taboos, family life and language."

*Our work fill up all our days  
We walk miles to the market place  
Climb the steep hills, plant the trees  
Mine the earth and dive the seas*



Subsistence economy pervades in most indigenous communities. Among many tribal groups in the Philippines, women bear a predominant role in food production. They do most of the work in the fields from planting, weeding, harvesting, and then selling the produce. The Bagobo women do all the household chores, childcare, raising animals like chicken, and most of the work



in the field.

Among the Orang Aslis in Malaysia, women weave baskets or mats and make blowpipes.

"We feel these injustices in our own lives. We want to do something to change this situation," Joannes of Sabah further said.

*We the women are solid and fighting  
Hearts and minds and spirits uniting  
Fists in the air, feet on the ground  
A women's movement on the birth*

Karen woman Naw Rebecca proudly explained the meaning of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) flag. "The white star at the center, with a black shadow behind it, symbolizes the women's role as light-bearers, shining to give what is inside them and to show their goodness. The black shadow," said Naw Rebecca,

"is meant to remind the women of their present situation in a society still in darkness because of the oppression and violence inflicted upon them by the Burmese military government and, at the same time, by the Karen men. The KWO casts a shining star in the struggle to light up this darkness.

### **Women leadership and organizing**

In the Philippines, the Cordillera women prove to be leaders in getting organized. In 1990, they launched a regional federation, INNABUYOG, which gathered some 60 women's organizations from the Cordillera provinces. The group focuses on education and training.

Towards the end of the conference the women vowed to support each other's struggles and drew up various resolutions and action plans. They agreed to continue working towards their empowerment in many ways: by building networks among the Asian indigenous women's communities; forming information pools to be forwarded to the United Nations; and improving the situation of discrimination on women.

The participants composed and sang the song embodying their declaration of unity and solidarity:

***We are the women of Asia  
We are the peoples of the land  
We are the women of Asia  
We stand together hand in hand.***

***Dayak, Papua, Rakhain, Chakma  
Kadazan, Lahu, Mamanwa  
Tay, Senoi, Burman, Ami  
Karen, Kachin, Agta, Puma.***

***Igorot, Mangyan, Banwaan  
Ayta, Ainu, Higaonon  
Naga, Teduray, Bagobo  
Tamil, Seediq, Tayal, Moro.***



# The 7th International Women's Health Meeting

**Theme: United we stand to take action  
on women's health**

**12-18 September 1993**

**Kampala, Uganda**

**Organizers:**

Uganda Organizing Committee, composed of local women's groups with the International Advisory Committee or INTERNET composed of seven international women's organizations including Isis International Manila.

**Objectives:**

1. To identify local, regional and international strategies for action on women's health issues.
2. To update each other on issues of international concern regarding women's health.
3. To share and exchange skills and experiences.
4. To strengthen the women's health movement in Africa.

**Topics:**

*Reproductive rights*

- \* *Sexual violence/rape*
- \* *Contraceptive and reproductive technologies*
- \* *Abortion*
- \* *Infertility*
- Global concern for women's health*
- \* *Occupational health hazards*
- \* *Prostitution and trafficking in women*
- \* *Environmental conservation*

*programs and their impact on women's lives*

*Social, political and economic factors influencing women's health*

\* *Foreign debt and structural adjustment policies*

\* *Political conflicts and militarization*

*Mental health of women*

\* *Stress*

*Impact of displacement*

*STDs and AIDS*

\* *Mobilizing women for prevention and control (especially subgroups of women at risk of infection)*

\* *Cultural and traditional practices (predisposing factors)*

\* *Access to services and social support mechanisms*

\* *Barrier methods*

\* *STDs, HIV/AIDS, and sexuality*

\* *Ethical concerns and HIV/AIDS*

\* *Sexual abuse, harassment, and rape*

*Political and community support for women's health*

\* *Traditional methods of healing/treatment*

\* *Primary Health Care: women's perspective/gender issues*

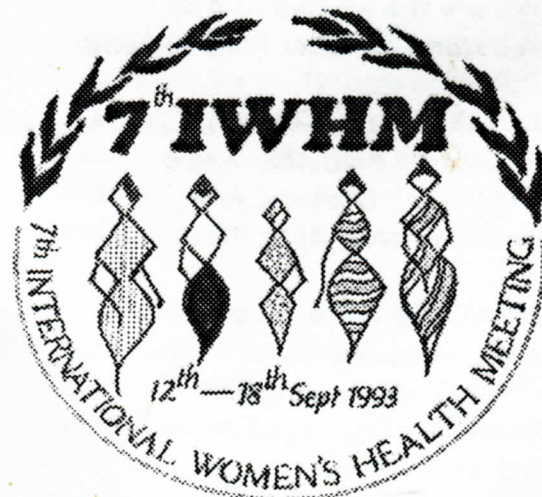
\* *Lobbying and advocacy*

\* *Community experiences*

**Accommodation:** Makerere University residence hall, fee of US\$ 175.00 - food and accommodation for seven days. Hotel accommodations also available.

**Venue:** Makerere University campus, Kampala, Uganda.

**Registration fee:** US\$ 100.00  
For further information, contact Coordinator, 7th IWHM, P.O. Box 1191, Kampala, Uganda. Tel. 235 791.





**12-17 February 1994  
Bangkok, Thailand**

A global conference on *Women Empowering Communication* is being organized by The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and jointly co-sponsored by Isis International Manila and International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) with local host Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.

The conference which is open to representatives of women's groups involved in communication and networking; women working in the alternative and mass media; academics and researchers interested in the theme expects the participation of some 400 women from all over the world.

The program line up includes: keynote speeches from internationally known women communicators and community leaders; communication models of innovative approaches; showcases of print, video and film productions; working group discussions and case studies on subthemes; drama, dance or cultural presentations; field trips to visit local women's groups; and regional and network meetings.

The conference themes are:

- ❁ *Women, Media and Power* - Media economics, access and right to communicate, soap operas and women's roles, media and violence, advertising, pornography, media employment, monitoring media.
- ❁ *Women and Communication Alternatives* - Alternative strategies, publishing, radio, video, press services, arts, indigenous communication forms, networking, resource centers.
- ❁ *Women, Communication and Development* - Development communication strategies, health and environment communication, literacy, media and tourism, the UN Decade, communication policies, new technology, training, research, communication education.
- ❁ *Women, Communication and Sociocultural Identity* - Tradition, pop culture, language, religious heritage, ecumenical dialogue, feminist theology, consumerism, media awareness, intercultural communication.

The venue is Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, a vast complex fairly close to Bangkok airport.

A regular registration fee of US\$ 250.00 will cover all meals, conference kit, field trip and shuttle from the airport. Reasonable room rates for single, twin, or four-bed occupancy will be announced later.

Post conference workshops will be offered for 1-1/2 days immediately following the conference on 18-19 February. These will be on special skills and interests such as Desktop Publishing, Women's Publications, Women's Theater, Print Marketing and Distribution. Final topics will be listed later. A post conference workshop registration fee of US\$ 60.00 includes meals and workshops materials.

Interested participants should write or call:  
*World Association For Christian Communication*  
357 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5QY, England, Tel. no.: (44) 71 582 9139; Fax : (44) 71 735 0340.

## Meet our new Board of Trustees members

In 1992, Isis International Manila elected two new members to the Board of Trustees -- Noeleen Heyzer and Maria Villariba. Both women have been longtime associates of Isis International and are active in work on women's issues. We would like to welcome them and introduce them to our readers.

### Noeleen Heyzer

Noeleen Heyzer, Singaporean citizen, has an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Singapore and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Cambridge, England.

She is currently coordinator of the Gender and Development Programme of the Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Author and editor of various publications, she has written extensively on women's issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

For the past nine years, she has worked on policy-centred research, handled policy dialogue, planning

meetings and seminars and done policy formulation with governments to include gender issues in development planning, implementation and evaluation.

In her training work with NGOs and government ministries, she initiated, designed and implemented (in consultation and with the involvement of numerous women's networks and donor agencies) eight regional, subregional and national training courses involving nearly 500 participants from 23 countries.

Noeleen has twin daughters, aged 15 years.



### Maria Villariba



Maria "Girlie" Villariba has a BA in Sociology from the University of the Philippines and an MA in Social Psychology from Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines.

Girlie has worked in various non-government organizations in the Philippines. She was a founding member of Gabriela, a women's coalition and founding executive director and currently board member of the Center for Women's Resources (CWR).

While based in Europe, Girlie worked as popular education consultant of the Commission for Fili-

pino Migrant Workers in London and Amsterdam from 1989-1990 and the Philippine Resource Centre in London from 1988-1989.

In 1992, Girlie moved back to the Philippines. She is a founding member and trainer of Education for Life Foundation (ELF) which collectively conceptualized the Philippine-Danish Folk School.

Describing herself as "an encyclopedia of pressures and joys," Girlie divides her creative energy between work and mothering two year old daughter Laraine.

## About Isis International

Isis International is an international non-governmental women's organization providing information and communication services to women worldwide. Since 1974, Isis International has been working to promote women's empowerment through information, communication, networking and skills sharing.

### *Isis International Resource Center*

Our Resource Center houses a unique collection of information and resource materials, most of it coming from women's groups, organizations and networks and from people's and development organizations. It documents the history and growth of the women's movement worldwide, its strengths and achievements, its problems and debates, and the many ways women are organizing.

Books, periodicals, pamphlets and studies cover a wide range of issues: environment, violence against women, sustainable development, health, reproductive rights, family, work, women's rights and many more. Our Human Resource database contains information on over 4000 women's groups and networks, individuals and institutions supporting women's activities worldwide.

The Resource Center offers: computerized library services for efficient and fast information access and retrieval. You may use these services by visiting the resource center or by writing for information on a specific issue; information packets on key issues; resource directories and women's database books, training in the use of new information technologies and training and assistance in setting up and organizing women's resource centers.

### *Isis International Publications*

**Women in Action** is a quarterly magazine about women's experiences, ideas, organizing activities, resource materials, groups, meetings and conferences. It is a communication channel for women to share and network with each other, to learn how women are organizing and taking action. It gives women the space to tell their stories, define their issues and agendas, and learn how other women are organizing and taking action.

**Women's Health Journal** is a quarterly magazine with analyses of key health issues, news and notices of key health meetings and activities, health campaigns and resources, experiences of women's health groups and networks. The magazine is published jointly by the Santiago and Manila offices of Isis International.

The Isis International book series focus on key issues that lead to women's empowerment. Each book brings together contributions from women around the world.

### *Health Networking*

Because health is a key issue for women, the Health Networking Program offers: health information packs on key issues; health advocacy materials; public fora on health issues; training on health information management for documentation centers; and Asia-Pacific networking consultations.

### *Advocacy and Campaigns*

The Advocacy and Campaigns Program offers: Action Alerts on campaigns, actions and solidarity appeals of women's groups and networks around the world; campaign kits on key issues in the global women's movement; information and resource materials on key campaign issues; and trend bulletins on issues and updates on major UN conferences

### *Administrative and Networking Services*

The Administrative and Networking Services Program offers: assistance to visitors in meeting local and regional women's groups; meeting facilities and communication services for local groups and visitors; networking assistance with women's groups in the region; accessing via E-Mail of women's information for prompt action and relay to networks; training materials for feminist human resource development; and brochures and popular products on Isis International and feminism.

