

Hope deferred

by Anne McClintock

And Still They Dance: Women, War and the Struggle for Change in Mozambique, by Stephanie Urdang. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, 256 pp., \$28.00 hardcover, \$12.00 paper.

Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism, edited by Sonya Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B. Young. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, 395 pp., \$36.00 hardcover, \$18.00 paper.

HOW MANY OF US could find on a world map the crooked Y of Mozambique? Yet this obscure neighbor of South Africa may prove to be apartheid's most grisly trophy. For ten years South Africa has sponsored in Mozambique a bandit army bent only on sowing ruin. During killing raids that have subjected the country to a fatal blood-letting and displaced more than a million and a half people, the bandits of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) routinely strip their captives and drive them naked into the bush. Some thousands of refugees who have survived the MNR's massacres straggle into the refugee camps wearing only strips of bark and sacking.

In her new book on women and the war in Mozambique, Stephanie Urdang recounts how one such rag-tag group approached a camp very slowly, seeming to want to keep their distance. From afar they looked clothed, but as they drew near it became clear that they were entirely naked. What had looked like clothes was only paint, carefully daubed on their bodies to cover their dereliction. In a nation so damaged that the people paint clothes on their bodies, such makeshift defiance might seem to symbolize a sad talent for survival under apartheid's decree of permanent regional havoc.

For three centuries the Portuguese ransacked their African colony in as blatant a case of "aggravated murder on a grand scale" as Joseph Conrad's Marlow saw in

Heart of Darkness. Under the dreaded system of *chibalo* (a form of forced labor) peasant farmers, most of them women, were forced by whip-lash to raise useless crops for sale in Europe, the profits clattering into Portuguese coffers. After this vicious colonial drubbing, the Portuguese were finally ousted by Frelimo, Mozambique's socialist independence movement, in 1975. But the Mozambicans were able to enjoy only a few short years of peace before white Rhodesia across the border, resentful of Mozambique's independence and socialist promise, spawned the MNR, dumped on African soil as the old-style European empires decamped. Since then the MNR has been heavily aided by its unsavory patron South Africa.

On a recent raid MNR bandits separated the women from the men and let the women go. "You are not 'people,'" the bandits said to the women, "you do not count." Yet, as Urdang's narrative testifies, this war is in many ways a war on women, and it is precisely these non-people who "do not count," the women of Mozambique, who are the subjects of her path-making book.

In an unusual blend of travel memoir, history and oral testimony, Urdang testifies that women in fact appeared to count very much in the early years of Mozambique's Frelimo. In 1975, the same year that Mozambique won independence, the UN launched the Decade for Women, and Sa-

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mora Machel, Mozambique's president, declared women's emancipation a national priority and a precondition for victory. At first the gains for women were very real. Women became equal before the law and in the constitution. Somehow enough money was found in a sorely strapped budget to run a national women's organization and to guarantee women a share of development aid. Frelimo devoted special energies to the creation of communal villages with shared water pumps and taps, schools, health clinics and adult education classes, innovations especially for women. Moreover, Frelimo has won a reputation for sincerity in its campaigns to halt *lobolo* (bride price), initiation rites, forced marriage and polygamy, and for encouraging women to enter traditionally male jobs.

Nevertheless, Urdang's book gives sobering poignancy, particularly for women, to the lines from Pontecorvo's famous film on the Algerian war of independence, *The Battle of Algiers*: "It is difficult to start a revolution, more difficult to sustain it. But it's later, when we've won, that the real difficulties will begin."

MUCH OF THE POWER and importance of *And Still They Dance* derives from Urdang's refusal to puree the complexities of Mozambique into a smooth soup. Rather, she allows the reader to feel the conflicts and contradictions in the stories women tell of their own lives. Certainly, as elsewhere in the third world, much of the women's plight can be traced to the legacy of colonialism. After independence, thousands of demoralized white settlers scrambled from the country (in what white Rhodesians dubbed "the chicken-run"), leaving behind a nation without foreign exchange, without people trained to perform the tasks abandoned by the fleeing whites, and an illiteracy rate for women of close to 100 percent. The settler exodus acted as a kind of economic Agent Orange, defoliating the

country of its technical and commercial resources — empire's last mean blow.

Frelimo responded desperately by turning the huge settler estates into badly conceived state farms — while neglecting the family farms traditionally run by women. As Urdang notes, had Frelimo favored the women farmers, who after all produce the vast bulk of the nation's food, Mozambique might have been better able to fend off the MNR when it appeared.

A killer army notoriously vacant of political goals or coherent policies, the MNR's favorite targets are the rural services whose loss is most calamitous for women: water pumps, clinics, schools, irrigation schemes. The sabotage of a water-pump in a village can mean a walk for women through bandit-infested country to a stream miles from the village. Urdang tells anecdotes of women and children kidnapped in the middle of such ordinary journeys, women viciously raped, then stripped and used as naked beasts of burden till they die of fatigue and starvation; thousands of children dragged into war and forced to mutilate or murder their own kin; pregnant women sliced open at the tips of bayonets; one woman forced to plow a field with her bare hands. One of the most heart-breaking features of the war is that the MNR is very much an army of children who have been press-ganged into murder, child-killers who are mostly under the age of fifteen.

Yet the women who spoke to Urdang also bear witness to the fact that not all the blame for their plight can be laid at the door of the colonial past or South Africa's presence to the south. Urdang's book echoes with the angry clamor of women protesting the tenacity of men insisting on their traditional patriarchal privileges. Women complain of being abandoned to starve by their husbands because they do not bear children, of domestic battery, the bad infinity of housework and childcare, of sexual violence and economic disadvantage — the familiar

global litany. As in many countries, national policy has favored cash cropping and surplus, a predictable pattern where men are given the training, the international aid, the machinery, the seeds, the loans and cash, despite the fact that it is women who continue unpaid the bone-breaking work of feeding the nation's families. As Urdang asks, given that women are the primary producers of food, should it not be they who make the decisions about economic policy?

Despite all this, Urdang's moving yet restrained narrative recounts dizzying acts of courage. If *And Still They Dance* seems at times structurally patchy, this is in part due to Urdang's efforts to blend the women's own intimate testimonies of struggle and refusal with the longer history of the nation. Much of the strength of the book is her attention to contradiction and nuance. The vexed issues of polygyny and *lobolo*, for example, can only be seen in context, and above all, as Urdang urges, it is the women themselves who must decide the changing direction of their lives.

The MNR and South Africa's predations, however, have been so catastrophic that Frelimo has recently been forced to renounce Marxism and consider shaking hands with the bandits. Mozambique is in every sense a country on its knees. What might have been a socialist showpiece and triumph for women has instead been turned into the killing-fields of Southern Africa, where women's emancipation has been postponed to cloud-cuckoo-land.

AROUND THE GLOBE the Women's Decade has been the decade of dreams deferred. As Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn Young's ground-breaking collection of essays, *Promissory Notes: Women and the Transition to Socialism* testifies, for women the promise of socialism has also been a history of hopes postponed.

Much of this massively informative book's contribution is in bringing between two covers the sprawl of so many different socialisms and feminisms — the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Vietnam, South Yemen, Bengal, the German Democratic Republic and Hungary — respecting historical variation while at the same time allowing the lineaments of continuity to be gleaned from change. The case studies that form the bulk of this collection, each scrupulously researched and important in its own right, are flanked at ei-

ther end by theoretical essays — frankly argumentative pieces which fling open many of the shut, and sometimes foetid, closets of Marxism and feminism's unhappy marriage.

Taken together, the essays suggest that socialism's fidelity to feminism has been fitful, to say the least. In a few cases such as Bengal (Amrita Basu), women's concerns are at best paid lip-service, at worst greeted with hilarity. More often than not, however, as in Nicaragua (Maxine Molyneux) and Cuba (Muriel Nazzari), very real efforts have been made to transform the lives of women. But nowhere is feminism in its own right allowed to be more than the maid-servant to socialism.

In South Yemen (Molyneux) and China (Marilyn Young, Christina Gilmartin), for example, women could mobilize for change in so far as they helped spread the political base of the party, swell the labor force and march against withered family elites and warlord regimes. In the process, the nose of traditional patriarchy was bloodied, and dramatic changes for women were won. But most socialist countries have been unenthusiastic about granting gender conflict (or racial conflict for that matter) as fundamental a role in history as class conflict, and feminism for its own sake has either been scoffed at or unceremoniously squelched.

Yet I doubt that any of the contributors would deny that women have generally fared better in socialist nations. In most of the countries explored, new laws, literacy and health campaigns, welfare and maternity benefits have dramatically emboldened women. In Nicaragua, for example, women hold 31 percent of responsible political posts, compared with the wretched world average of twelve percent. After the US's fit of thuggery in Grenada, by contrast, welfare programs were disbanded, the women's organization was quelled and unemployment surged. By and large, the contributors to *Promissory Notes* defend the dramatic boons for women generated by the sundry socialist revolutions, but chafe at the tardiness of change and the betrayal of promises.

For good or ill, Engels left his mark virtually everywhere. The founding fathers of socialism decreed that capitalism has been our ruin, with patriarchy merely a nasty second cousin destined to wither away when the real villain finally croaks. The ills of women will vanish into air once the entire female sex is working hard in public industry. Yet as



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Mozambican women. From *And Still They Dance*.

this volume vividly and painfully testifies, most women in the world are already up to their elbows in public industry, bent double in field and factory, and then bent double again in the household.

Much of the value of the collection derives from its stress on how many different socialisms, feminisms and patriarchies there indeed are. Yet striking patterns emerge. Essay after essay affirms that the chief fetter to women's freedom is the gendered division of labor. If women have come to do men's work as well as their own, men have not come to share women's work. Indeed, in parts of Vietnam, for example, as Christine White's excellent essay shows, women now do the work of women, the work of men, and also the work of buffaloes. This is a cruel parody of Engels' formula that the road to public industry would be the road to emancipation. Certainly, women in Vietnam have been admitted into the army. As one male Vietnamese poet put it: "In the assault you command a hundred squads. Night returns, you sit mending fighters' clothes." But as White asks wryly, who other than a woman general would be praised for staying awake after battle to mend her soldiers' uniforms?

The notorious double day cuts a swath across countries, classes and cultures. Certain socialist countries such as Nicaragua and Cuba have gone further than any other state by writing into the law the equal sharing of housework and inventing ingenious tactics such as radio announcements during meal-times urging men to help. But in the absence of sustained campaigns, the weight of male self-interest and the undertow of patriarchal Catholicism, Confucianism and fundamentalism of all kinds prove overwhelming. The Mozambique women's organization is told, for example, to urge women to work even harder and thus shame their men into helping, as risible and futile a strategy as could be imagined.

Promissory Notes also reveals, however, how often socialist attempts to transform women's lives have been stalled by wars of aggression. The US, for one, has bred death squads and proxy armies around the world, turning entire nations into military camps. Countries like Vietnam and Mozambique

have been made to pay a frightful price for embracing Marxism. How can one talk of day care, literacy or women's health in countries permanently mobilized for national defense? At the same time, how can one talk of global sisterhood when women who have struggled for the right to wear khaki end up servicing male wars of aggression against women in other countries? Indeed, one is forced to wonder whether any feminist theory of socialist development can ignore the prospect of permanent war with unkind powers like the US.

This raises the vexed issue of the relation between relatively privileged women in the West and other embattled women around the world. There were times, as well, when reading this superb collection I felt the immediacy of women's lives was being bleached out by acronyms and swallowed up in statistics. Unlike Urdang's book, *Promissory Notes* does not echo with the voices of women in different countries speaking for themselves. Perhaps this is unavoidable, but one is forcibly reminded of the Algerian feminist Marnea Lazreg's caution to Western feminists to be wary of the borrowed authority of academic interpretation. This issue is broached somewhat belatedly in the round-table discussion at the end of *Promissory Notes*, where some welcome passion is generated.

One unaccountable omission in *Promissory Notes* is that not a jot of interest is shown in the appalling plight of lesbians (and gay men for that matter) in many socialist countries. The metaphor of the "unhappy marriage" of Marxism and feminism betrays a lurking heterosexism within socialist feminism itself that urgently needs to be tackled. Finally, then, contributor Delia Aguilar's angry call to white women to listen should serve as a timely warning that Western feminists honor their own promissory notes, not only to women in the third world, but to minority and beleaguered women in their own countries, if sisterhood is indeed ever to become global. ❖