

BOOK REVIEW

Stephanie Urdang. *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979. \$16.50. Pp. 320.

This book makes a major contribution to understanding the connection and interplay between socialism and feminism, and class and sex. In *Fighting Two Colonialisms*, Urdang focuses on women struggling to transform their society, actively participating in the building of a socialist society. Urdang's book presents the actual experiences of African women in a non-theoretical way. The central lesson we can all learn from the people of Guinea-Bissau is that women's issues cannot be relegated to the periphery of a socialist movement. It is not enough to say that socialist revolution sets the basis for women's liberation, but equally that feminism (whether called that or not) is basic to true socialist transformation.

Urdang first visited Guinea-Bissau in 1974, while the anti-colonial war against the Portuguese still continued. Guinea-Bissau is a small agricultural country on the west coast of Africa, and along with Angola and Mozambique had been subject to Portuguese colonialism for over four centuries. All three countries began national liberation struggles in the early 1960's, and shared information and support throughout the fifteen years until the revolution in Portugal that finally brought independence to the African countries. Thus Guinea-Bissau's position in the international capitalist system has been integral to its internal development, and has important effects on women at all levels of society. The revolution in Guinea-Bissau is led by the PAIGC (the African Independence Party of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands).

During her first visit Urdang was able to see some of the ways in which women's and men's work had begun to change. The equality of women and the centrality of women's issues to the revolution had been articulated by Amilcar Cabral (PAIGC's first president) from the beginning of the struggle. Urdang was able to meet and talk with a wide range of women - both active and not active in political organizing, from rural and urban communities, old and young, Muslim and non-Muslim. Her training as a journalist is evident in the skillful retelling of people's lives. The individual histories are a wonderful part of the book; rather than try to choose one to share here, I will quote at length a section in which Urdang talks about some of the changes.

Polygyny, because it is so tied in with other oppressive customs, is opposed by the PAIGC...The goal is for marriages

based on love and mutual respect, as well as free choice. However, because it is so basic to the social and economic structure of the society, it is not something that can be erased in a few years. Much more immediate success has been accorded PAIGC's efforts to terminate forced marriage and the taboo on divorce for women...Despite the acknowledged time such changes take, polygyny is noticeably on the decline...'Polygyny is dying out,' Francisca told me. 'People don't want it any more.' (p. 164).

Women's work. Visible everywhere. Women cooking around the fire, women pounding, women calling after children, women collecting water. Some distance away men sitting together, talking or silently watching the afternoons go by. And yet, while the superficial impression is true as far as it goes, a really sharp look brings other perceptions into bold relief. One sees men helping women in their work in numerous ways. Taking goods to the people's stores on their heads. Helping with children. Collecting water. Washing clothes. Sharing more equally the work in the fields. 'Before women worked for men,' we hear Kumba say. 'Not anymore. Now men and women work together.' (p. 165).

But Urdang does not simply show improvements in living conditions or increasing public activity of women and domestic activity of men. She discusses at length the implications of such decisions as that concerning the role of women as soldiers. The value of women's traditional work was recognized, and the provision of food and other necessities was considered a revolutionary act. Local councils were required to include two women among the five representatives, and these women were chosen on the basis of their contribution. By recognizing and valuing women's work as a vital part of the war effort, women were able to take part in the new government in a less disruptive way, and to gain important experience as leaders. In addition, men were compelled to acknowledge that there was importance and value in domestic chores traditionally done by women. At the same time, women were being trained in different skills to expand their opportunities, and men were encouraged to share in household tasks.

The emphasis on learning from local experience is a central one in Guinea-Bissau. While never losing sight of their

goal of a socialist society, the Guineans have not simply adopted schemes from other countries. The decision not to use women as soldiers illustrates this. Urdang points out that the dense population and small territory meant that in Guinea-Bissau women were not needed in the army, simply in humanpower terms. In Mozambique, which shared many perspectives on socialism and the inclusion of women in the struggle with Guinea-Bissau, the population was spread more thinly over a large area, and it was necessary to include women in the army. Even so, women in Mozambique had to push the men to be included as combatants; their contribution is well known to Mozambicans now.

Urdang provides a good balance between general background information, her experiences and observations, and Guineans own stories and perceptions. Although clearly excited by the advances made, she is not blind to the continuing limitations on women. I was deeply moved by the women of Guinea-Bissau and their commitment to socialism and feminism. A bonus in this book is the collection of photographs showing people at work transforming their country. Learning about Guinea-Bissau should help to recommit us to changing our own society, a process that will improve people's lives everywhere.

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