Marion Fennelly Levy

EACH IN HER OWN WAY

Five Women Leaders of the Developing World

With an introduction by
Sue Ellen M. Charlton

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EACH IN HER OWN WAY

To the five women whose lives inspired this work,

and to the countless others whose stories may never be told

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PREFACE

Much of what women do in this world—the labors that keep families and communities functioning—is not reflected in the gross national product of any country, is not a factor in economic planning, and is rarely part of recorded history. In much of the developing world, these omissions are particularly incongruous when one considers that women are major participants in agriculture and food processing; the United Nations estimates that they probably do more than half the world's work. Yet, because the economic and social support that women provide society is not part of the cash economy, it is often invisible. The "invisible woman," then, has been an international phenomenon, and nowhere more so than in the most conservative and traditional societies. As family well-being, if not survival, increasingly depends on women, it is more important than ever that women's labors be recognized and upgraded. The long-term food crisis in Africa brings home this point most vividly inasmuch as women farmers are estimated to be responsible for 60 to 80 percent of Africa's agricultural labor; yet they most often lack the means or skills to increase their production.[1] It has been said that the future of that continent lies in the hands of the African farmer and her husband.

But change, welcome or not, is sweeping over the world, brought on by national independence movements and the end of colonialism; by the revolution in technology; by the enormous expansion of communications; by international economic forces and urbanization; by both the rapid growth in population and modern methods of fertility control; by the impact of Western ideas and values, and the reactive upsurge of nationalism and religious fundamentalism; and by the growing awareness among women all over the world of their more rightful role in society.

For women who have benefited from increased education and greater job opportunities, the changes have generally been welcome. But those who do not share in those advantages can see their traditional role and status, both in the family and in the community, being undermined. As men go off to the towns and cities for paid employment, often learning new skills, women are being left behind—figuratively as well as literally. One need only think of the growing number of households headed by women to understand women's new responsibilities and, all

too often, their new burdens.[2] Where the traditional extended family has broken down and the state is unable, or unwilling, to provide the support services that the families customarily had shouldered, women are worse off than ever.

The United Nations Decade for Women that ended in 1985 generated an important body of information and testimony about the true condition of women worldwide. The three women's conferences during the Decade amply demonstrated that a revolution of international magnitude is occurring, centered on women's aspirations and accomplishments; they also dramatized to governments the fact that economic and social development will not be achieved without the active and skilled participation of women. These are changes that are working toward women's greater equity in many societies.

At the first UN women's conference, held in Mexico City in 1975, an attempt was made to present a unified expression of women's needs. Ten years later, at the final conference in Nairobi, a greater acknowledgment of the divisions caused by cultural, economic, and political forces was apparent. The recognition of diversity did not negate the consensus that women are particularly handicapped by poverty, malnutrition, ill health, illiteracy, isolation, and lack of access to resources. Most of the world's women, particularly rural women, have a common catalog of needs: access to income-producing activities; training and education; health services for themselves and their families; family planning; improved legal rights, particularly those related to family law; access to such resources as credit; participation in community decision-making and the political process; and, for rural women, improved technology for agriculture, food processing, and water and fuel collection. In particular, the aim of the "Forward-Looking Strategies" that grew out of the Decade for Women was to propose how governments, private agencies, and women themselves might respond to those needs.

Prodded by the activism generated by the Decade, many governments made substantive efforts to upgrade women's status. Previous development efforts that counted on a "filtering down" of national economic development to the poor have generally been repudiated, though not totally abandoned. As the poor have been more accurately identified as disproportionately composed of women, development efforts have been changing course. The question increasingly being posed is how to reach the village level and find out what women really need.

Programs for women have tended to center on their traditional roles as mothers and housewives: Home economics rather than income generation has been the subject. As Mayra Buvinic points out, welfare-oriented strategies based on women's customary roles prevail throughout the developing world. "With the exception of family planning

programs, they are politically safe. [They] do not address the issues of women's poverty and their lack of access to economic opportunities and resources." On the contrary, they perpetuate the exclusion of women from mainstream development programs.[3]

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in development have had the opportunity to be more flexible than governments in responding to women's real needs. Although international NGOs tend to carry with them a Western set of values, the best have taken great care to work within the cultural context of particular communities. A positive effect of their presence in development programs in Third World countries has been, I believe, to expand the options available for women. Agencies such as UNICEF, the Overseas Education Fund, and the Save the Children Federation have emphasized the role of women in family and community welfare and in development activities. They have been at the forefront of programs operating at the village level. A critical difference brought about by NGO initiatives has been the provision of funds and resources to women's programs that are not provided by governments.

Of course, such initiatives represent only a small portion of international development efforts, but they often constitute the most creative and experimental part. A government's strong commitment to raising the status of women is a crucial element of these efforts if it includes women's increased participation in the political process. For the five women whose stories are told in this book, NGOs have played a pivotal role at moments of critical decision, both in their personal lives and with respect to their work.

Women's groups and organizations have been a principal vehicle for advancing the cause of women, as this book demonstrates. In some countries, such structures have long existed; for instance, women's saving societies, work groups, and social-welfare clubs flourish in Cameroon. By contrast, women's groups at the village level do not form part of the tradition in either Bangladesh or Egypt, where such groups are of recent origin. In such a setting, governments or NGOs trying to mobilize women have had a more difficult time. For many women, including the five leaders described in this book, women's groups or associations have provided an essential platform of support and an opening to a larger world.

My purpose in writing this book is to record the work and spirit of five extraordinary women leaders who have made significant contributions to the lives of women in Third World countries. It has been sobering to realize that their work might not have been recorded or remembered were it not for these stories. I also hope to give a face and a voice to issues that confront many rural women in the developing world; indeed, the fields of expertise and endeavor of these five leaders

quite accurately outline the issues that are of primary concern to most rural women. Elvina Mutua of Kenya concentrates on farm women's small-business enterprises; Hasina Khan of Bangladesh works in non-formal education and integrated rural development; Aziza Hussein of Egypt is at the forefront of both the family-planning movement and the effort to win greater protection for women under the law; Elizabeth O'Kelly, an ex-British colonial officer, pioneered in efforts to provide technology appropriate to women's work and started the successful Corn Mill Societies of Cameroon; and Reyna de Miralda of Honduras helped to form a national organization of peasant women, thereby bringing them into the political process for the first time. Elizabeth O'Kelly, Elvina Mutua, and Aziza Hussein had worked in behalf of women in the early 1950s, before women's activism became as common as it is today; hence they are continuing a long tradition within their own countries of working for the advancement of women. Although their programs concentrate on particular aspects of women's lives within a specific cultural setting, the problems they address transcend national boundaries. And as these problems are the daily concern of most rural women, it can be said that the goals of the Nairobi conference are being brought to life.

It was hard to choose five particular women to write about. My own experience as women's program coordinator for Save the Children from 1975 to 1981 took me to many developing countries and gave me the opportunity to work with women of great leadership ability and accomplishment. I consulted dozens of people I knew in the field of international development to identify other outstanding women, keeping in mind the geographical and cultural diversity that I wished to encompass. The women whose stories appear in this book were named again and again as being in the vanguard of the most promising changes. They have managed to initiate extraordinary programs in large part because they are themselves extraordinary. Each has taken personal risks in her own society in order to accomplish her goals. The cultures within which each has worked call for behavior very different from that of women in the Western world, and all five women have had to endure the suspicion or disapproval of important people in their lives. They come from widely divergent backgrounds, from the most privileged to the least, and from sharply different cultures; but each of the women was sufficiently stirred by the injustices that she saw and lived through to devote her life to programs that might help to redress the balance between men and women. Their motives have ranged from the pragmatic to the idealistic, from "there's a job to be done and let's do it" to a burning sense of injustice. Whatever the divergent reasons that drove them to take

uncommon courses, they share a determination to help women improve their lives.

Like all of us, of course, they are products of their individual societies and began their careers with a set of beliefs, prejudices, and expectations not too different from those of their peers. In their early days, they all seemed to accept the traditional view of women's role, within the context of their own cultures, and only later recognized how sharply limited their choices had been.

I had met three of the women before I even thought of writing this book. I knew Aziza Hussein when she was the delegate from the United Arab Republic to the UN Status of Women Commission and when we were both connected with the International Planned Parenthood Federation. I made the acquaintance of Elizabeth O'Kelly in 1978 during a conference for rural women in the Philippines at which she was a major speaker. My introduction to Hasina Khan took place in 1980 at the UN Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen, where we presented a series of workshops together at the forum of nongovernmental organizations. After the book was under way, I had the opportunity in March 1986 to accompany Elvina Mutua on a tour of her programs outside of Mombasa, Kenya. And, finally, I was fortunate to see Reyna de Miralda in her home in Juticalpa, Honduras, in March 1985 and to accompany her to several of the villages in which the Honduran Federation of Peasant Women is active.

I interviewed each of the women several times, with the exception of Hasina Khan, whose interviews were recorded by Phyllis Forman, wife of the Save the Children director in Bangladesh. All of the interviews were designed around the same series of questions, for I wanted each woman to tell in her own words about her childhood, her family, the society she lived in, and her early education. I wanted to know whether she felt different from her peers, which people were the most influential in her life, and what her choices at critical moments had been. The responses to the questions are directly quoted throughout the text when other sources are not given. I was fortunate to have (and to be able to quote from) the letters that Elizabeth O'Kelly wrote from Cameroon and Sarawak as well as the extensive writings of Aziza Hussein. As all of the women had connections with NGOs, I was able to interview the people with whom they worked and to read some of the evaluation reports of their projects. For further insights, I spoke or wrote to their personal friends as well.

I asked each woman about the steps in her career. If there is a generalization that can be made about all five, they came from families that placed the highest value on education for their sons and daughters—a factor that, more than anything else, set them apart from their peers. For

Hasina Khan, Aziza Hussein, and Reyna de Miralda, school was the liberating experience that put them on a course different from that of most girls they knew. Elizabeth O'Kelly, too, used formal education to open up a career although her experiences in Africa were her greatest teacher. As a result, the lives of these women broadened and went in directions their mothers had never dreamed were possible.

A man's support was important to two of the women. The fathers and husbands of Aziza Hussein and Elvina Mutua were critical to their success. For Hasina Khan and Reyna de Miralda, their mothers were their champions. Elizabeth O'Kelly was essentially on her own. All were caught up in changes that rocked the countries in which they worked—changes, wrought by national independence, political upheaval, or natural disaster, that compounded the stresses on those societies caused by modernization. Each woman was exposed to situations in which she had to learn tolerance of different religions or different points of view, and each had an active empathy with other people's sufferings.

Their approaches to their work were as varied as the women themselves. Hasina Khan brought the idea of self-realization to her women's program in Bangladesh; Reyna de Miralda used the techniques of grassroots political organizing; Elizabeth O'Kelly ran a government literacy program before developing women's societies; Elvina Mutua brought entrepreneurial skills to her craft groups; and Aziza Hussein was an advocate for women's rights and family planning with governments and other international bodies.

Leadership is always more difficult to define than program success; it is also more difficult to trace to its sources, aside from recognizing a common core of ambition. In my interviews with the women, two characteristics were most striking: They were all blessed with bountiful energy, and they all welcomed responsibility. They juggled competing claims on their time, undertook the most taxing travel schedules and field trips, and still seemed to have reserves. Most important, not one of them was afraid to take risks; each had a strong sense of determination to accomplish what she had set out to do, despite many obstacles and criticisms. I believe that all five women substantially changed their views over the years and became far more aware of the particular disadvantages that women endure. But they would not consider themselves feminists because that term has a Western identification and implies to them not only a woman's selfish view of life but also probable promiscuity. Yet they are firmly for the cause of women, call it what they may.

This book is not intended as a scholarly study, but I have included a bibliography for further readings in development and women's studies. I have also tried to provide a setting for each story by giving essential background information about the lives of women in the countries

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under study. The narratives speak for themselves, and I have chosen not to comment on them except for an occasional point of clarification. Other perspectives of the same events undoubtedly exist.

My own most vivid picture of the changing world for women came about during a brief field trip to the provincial city of Mahweit in Yemen. At the end of each working day, we joined different groups of Yemeni women during their customary afternoon visits at one another's houses between the hours of four and six. The women would have tea, chew *qat* (a mild stimulant), dance, and talk. Those occasions were among the warmest and most animated gatherings of women that I can recall. Except for those afternoon hours, women and girls were almost completely secluded in their homes. When they did go out, perhaps to bring water up from the well or to make an "approved" visit, they were veiled and covered by *chadors* (concealing cloaks). They had to walk through town on the separate, rocky paths reserved for women.

The women of Mahweit had experienced almost nothing of the modern world. On the last day of my visit, we attended an afternoon gathering at the home of the provincial governor's wife. When the electricity went on at five in the evening, as it customarily did, the governor's wife turned on her new television set. All the talk and laughter ended, and all eyes turned with wonder to watch an Egyptian soap opera. There on the screen, an unveiled woman was in conversation with a man who seemed neither husband nor kin. I will never forget the faces of the women. I can only imagine the effects that such an intrusion, repeated many times, might have had on their views of the world, and I can only hope that those wonderful afternoon gatherings will survive.

Marion Fennelly Levy

NOTES

1. Women's Research and Training Centre, UN Economic Commission for Africa, "Women and National Development in African Countries: Some Profound Contradictions," *African Studies Review*, vol. 18, no. 3 (December 1975), pp. 50, 62.

2. Mayra Buvinic and Nadia Youssef, with Barbara Von Elm, *Women-Headed Households: The Ignored Factor in Development* (Washington, D.C.: International Center for Research on Women, 1978), p. iii.

3. Mayra Buvinic, Margaret Lycette, and William Paul McGreevey, eds., *Women and Poverty in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 64.

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

by Sue Ellen M. Charlton

In the narratives that follow, Marion Levy shares with affection the lives of five leaders of social, economic, and political development in the Third World. These women are leaders because of their courage and stamina, their understanding of the unique conditions of their compatriots, their commitment to improving those conditions, and their willingness to innovate. They are courageous also in their ability to challenge the historical traditions that subordinate women's interests to those of men. Their efforts to alter the conditions of poverty and powerlessness in their countries have necessitated physical, intellectual, and emotional strength over long periods; but, in time, they have all come to understand that eliminating poverty entails change that is simultaneously cultural, social, and economic. Often their work has generated suspicion and hostility, which have been expressed even by those who claim to share the desire for development.

It has become commonplace to write about the special needs of women in development and to decry development patterns and projects that either ignore these needs or actually disadvantage women—but it is easy to forget how recent is our sensitivity to the issues of women in the Third World. The roots of our sensitivity lie in the intellectual currents of criticism that have emerged over the past thirty years. First and foremost, that criticism has been leveled at a course of development that has benefited industry to the detriment of agriculture, cities to the detriment of rural areas, the middle class and well-off to the detriment of the very poor, and men to the detriment of women. Our sensitivity was foreshadowed, moreover, by attacks on the status quo that were waged by Western feminist movements in the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, feminists in North America and Western Europe have raised questions about the structure of power, the distribution of work and wealth, and the efficacy of many social policies.

I am indebted to the encouragement of my colleagues, Carol Cantrell and Pattie Cowell, and to the assistance of Earlene Bell. —*Sue Ellen M. Charlton*

The processes of reexamining development priorities and rethinking the implications of gender converged at a time when other criticisms of the established orders of the world had begun to undermine assumptions about the meaning of development and who should benefit from it. Voices from the less developed countries made themselves heard in varied (and sometimes contradictory) ways. For example, the policies of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) threatened Western dominance in energy and ultimately affected political matters, especially in the Middle East. The demands of Third World governments for a restructuring of international institutions produced gradual, but perceptual, changes in the United Nations system, the World Bank, and a wide variety of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The rapaciousness of some "development" projects has opened new debates about the environmental benefits and costs of standard practices. Persistent malnourishment and even famine have made it clear that development has not helped hundreds of thousands of people in the world, and it is equally clear that those most severely plagued by food shortages are women and children. Civil strife and war have contributed to these problems, as refugees have massed in camps or moved across national borders; and it is certainly no accident that the refugees in many areas have been predominantly women and children.

Under these conditions of dramatic change, women in Third World countries have risen to positions of local, national, and international leadership against odds virtually unimaginable by Western leaders. Although such fortitude is not unknown in cataclysmic times, the structure of the international system in the late twentieth century has given the experience of these leaders new importance. The technologies of modern transportation and communication have made it possible for the stories of the five women in this book to be recounted and to inspire across international boundaries. The political structures and priorities of international institutions created the United Nations Decade for Women, and the three UN conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), along with the NGO forums, have legitimized the desires and activities of millions of women from hundreds of cultures.

Remarkable women, like remarkable men, have always existed. What is significant about the five women portrayed here is that they are not the most famous women of their age and, in fact, are very different from the Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, or even Mother Theresa and Corazon Aquino of our decade. In many ways these five typify the invisible leaders of international development efforts: invisible to the mass media, yet well known to those whose lives they have touched and, thanks to

Marion Levy, to those of us who have an opportunity to learn from their successes and failures.[1]

What follows in this Introduction is an attempt to sketch a comparative picture of these women. Their experiences are common in some respects, unique in others. Taken together, they raise a number of questions about effective leadership, the strengths and weaknesses of women's organizations, and the contradictory effects of state institutions on the efforts of women to participate fully in the search for life-enriching development strategies.

In the first two parts of the Introduction, we shall look at the tension between tradition and change. The discussion in the first part emphasizes the role of cultural constraints on women's roles and options, using a comparison between Egypt and Bangladesh for illustration. It is here that we also get our first glimpse of the unique circumstances that propelled Aziza Hussein and Hasina Khan into positions of leadership. The second part reveals some of the massive changes engendered by international war, decolonization, and civil conflict that affected the lives of the five leaders portrayed here. The third part focuses on what is commonly known as the private/public distinction or dichotomy, and on the role of the government in supporting, hindering, and/or manipulating women's causes and organizations.

The fourth part of the Introduction looks at women's organizations and leadership, and asks what we can learn about these from the five women described here. What makes them exceptional in the context of their countries and their times? What are the similarities and differences in their efforts to build and use organizations for development? Finally, the concluding section explores briefly the potential for a new *international* feminism, by whatever name it might be called. As Marion Levy notes early on, these five women—like many Third World leaders—eschew identification with Western feminism. The experience of the UN Decade, however, suggests that popular images of feminism are in need of dramatic revision as "Westerners" and "Easterners," "Northern" women and "Southern" women, argue, share, and learn from each other.

Culture, Gender, and Class

Peoples' lives—what they can do, how and when they can do it, the choices they can and want to make—are circumscribed by culture, gender, and class. Although it is true that gender often seems the most predictable of these factors in defining opportunity around the world, gender never operates independent of class or culture. Moreover, even when gender, class, and culture all conspire to limit opportunity for a

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