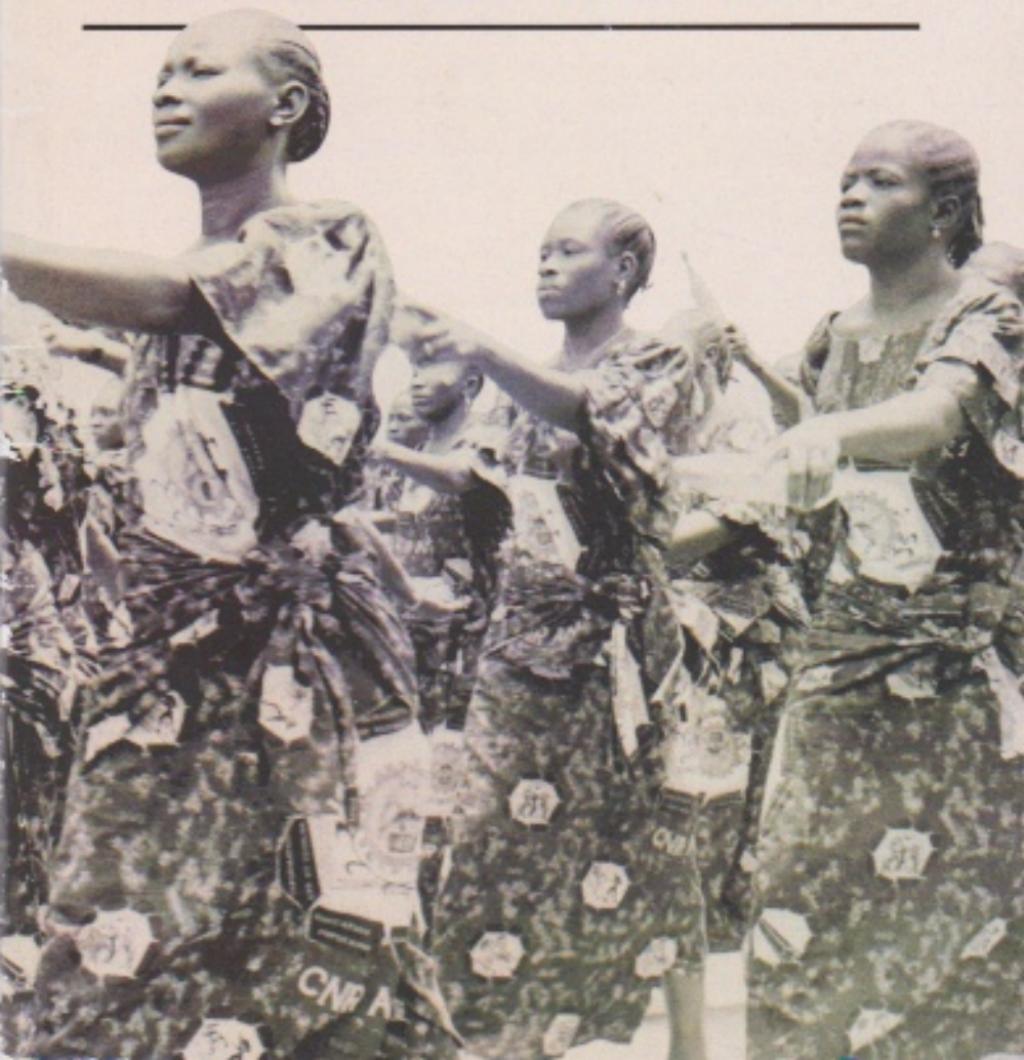


# WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND THE AFRICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Thomas Sankara

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## Preface

On August 4, 1983, a popular uprising in the West African country of Upper Volta—one of the world's poorest countries—ushered in one of the deepest revolutions in African history. Its leader was thirty-three-year-old Thomas Sankara, who became president of the new government. The country was renamed Burkina Faso.

For the next four years, the Burkina revolution carried out an ambitious program that included land reform, fighting corruption, reforestation to halt the creeping desert and avert famine, and giving priority to education and health care. In order to carry out these measures, the government encouraged the organization, mobilization, and political education of the country's peasants, workers, women, and youth. A high priority was put on Burkina's solidarity with freedom struggles around the world, from the battle against apartheid in South Africa to the revolutionary movements in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Palestine.

On October 15, 1987, Sankara was murdered in the course of a counterrevolutionary military coup that destroyed the revolutionary government.

One week before his death, speaking about the slain Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara, Sankara stated that while revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, "you cannot kill ideas." That statement has been borne out with regard to Thomas Sankara himself. He has become a symbol for millions throughout Africa who viewed the Burkinabè revolution as a source of inspiration in the battle for Africa's genuine national liberation.

The main item in this pamphlet is a speech by Sankara to a rally of several thousand women held in Burkina's capital city of

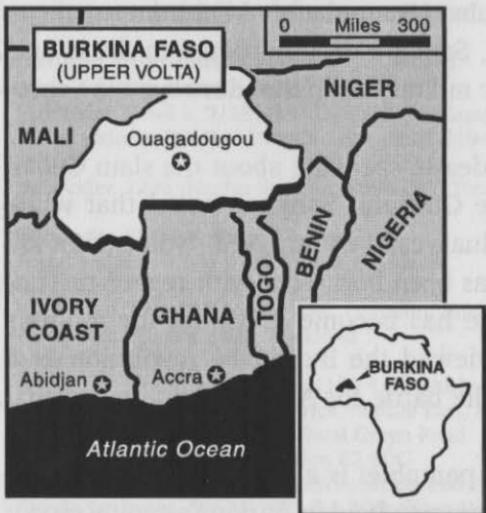
Ouagadougou on March 8, 1987, commemorating International Women's Day. Also included is a section from the revolution's basic programmatic document, Sankara's Political Orientation Speech, issued shortly after the revolution's triumph. Both items are reprinted from Pathfinder's collection *Thomas Sankara Speaks*.

From his experience as a revolutionary fighter, convinced of the need for a Marxist understanding of human society, Sankara explains here the origin of women's oppression and the importance of the fight to eradicate it. He pays special attention to the challenges facing the fight for women's emancipation in Africa.

Sankara's March 1987 speech is a lasting contribution to the fight for women's emancipation. It is as relevant for North America and Europe as it is for Africa, as well as for women and men fighting against all forms of exploitation and oppression everywhere in the world.

Dorotea Wilson, a member of Nicaragua's National Assembly and a Sandinista leader, paid the following tribute to Sankara's contribution:

"As a Nicaraguan woman, whose ancestral roots are closely linked to the merciless exploitation of millions of Blacks in Latin



America and the Caribbean," Wilson wrote, "I think what Sankara said about the situation of women in his memorable speech of March 8, 1987, is extremely important. In it, Sankara not only explained the historical origins of women's oppression, but throughout the speech also gave specific examples of the *daily and intimate character* of machismo in society. This speech is not only a declaration of principles. It also shows a profound understanding of, and active solidarity with, the struggle of women, which in fact belongs to and involves all of humanity."



# **The revolution cannot triumph without the emancipation of women**

MARCH 8, 1987

It is not an everyday occurrence for a man to speak to so very many women at once. Nor does it happen every day that a man suggests to so many women new battles to be joined. A man experiences his first bashfulness the minute he becomes conscious that he is looking at a woman. So, sisters, you will understand that despite the joy and the pleasure it gives me to be speaking to you, I still remain a man who sees in every one of you a mother, a sister, or a wife.

I hope, too, that our sisters here from Kadiogo Province who do not understand French—the foreign language in which I will be giving my speech—will be patient with us, as they always have been. After all, it is they who, like our mothers, accepted the task of carrying us for nine months without a complaint. [*Sankara then explains in the Mooré language that these women would receive a translation.*]

Comrades, the night of August 4 gave birth to an achievement that was most beneficial for the Burkinabè people. It gave our people a name and our country new horizons. Imbued with

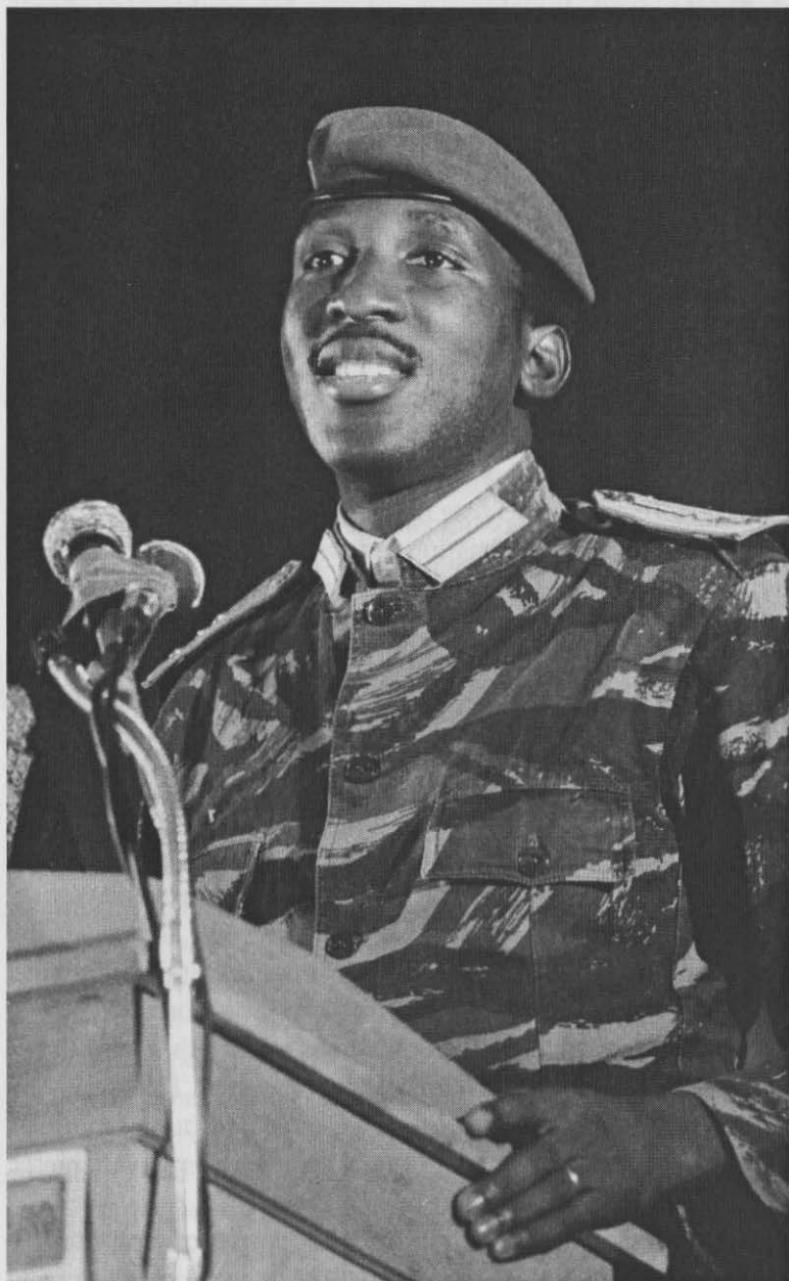
the invigorating sap of freedom, the men of Burkina, the humiliated and outlawed of yesterday, received the stamp of what is most precious in the world: honor and dignity. From this moment on, happiness became accessible. Every day we advance toward it, heady with the first fruits of our struggles, themselves proof of the great strides we have already taken. But this selfish happiness is an illusion. There is something crucial missing: woman. She has been excluded from this joyful procession.

Though our men have already reached the edges of this great garden that is the revolution, our women are still confined within the shadows of anonymity. Among themselves, in voices loud or soft, they talk of the hopes that have embraced Burkina—hopes that are, for them, still merely fine words. The revolution's promise is already a reality for men. But for women, it is still merely a rumor. And yet the authenticity and the future of our revolution depend on women.

These are vital and essential questions, because nothing whole, nothing definitive or lasting could be accomplished in our country, as long as a crucial part of ourselves is kept in this condition of subjugation—a condition imposed in the course of centuries by various systems of exploitation.

Starting now, the men and women of Burkina Faso should profoundly change their image of themselves. For they are part of a society that is not only establishing new social relations but is also provoking a cultural transformation, upsetting the relations of authority between men and women and forcing each to rethink the nature of both.

This task is formidable but necessary. For it will determine our ability to bring our revolution to its full stature, unleash its full potential, and show its true meaning for the direct, natural, and necessary relations between men and women, the most natural of all relations between people. This will show to what extent the natural behavior of man has become human and to what extent he has realized his human nature.



ERNEST HARSCH/MILITANT

**Thomas Sankara speaking in Harlem, New York, October 1984.**

This human being, this vast and complex combination of pain and joy; solitary and forsaken, yet creator of all humanity; suffering, frustrated, and humiliated, and yet endless source of happiness for each one of us; this source of affection beyond compare, inspiring the most unexpected courage; this being called weak, but possessing untold ability to inspire us to take the road of honor; this being of flesh and blood and of spiritual conviction—this being, women, is you. You are our mothers and life companions, our comrades in struggle, and because of this fact you should by rights assert yourselves as equal partners in the joyful victory feasts of the revolution.

It is in this light that all of us, men and women, must define and affirm the role and place of women in society. Therefore, we must restore to man his true image by making the reign of freedom prevail over differentiations imposed by nature and by eliminating all kinds of hypocrisy that sustain the shameless exploitation of women.

Posing the question of women in Burkinabè society today means posing the abolition of the system of slavery to which they have been subjected for millennia. The first step is to try to understand how this system works, to grasp its real nature in all its subtlety, in order then to work out a line of action that can lead to women's total emancipation.

In other words, in order to win this battle that men and women have in common, we must be familiar with all aspects of the woman question on a world scale and here in Burkina. We must understand how the struggle of the Burkinabè woman is part of a worldwide struggle of all women and, beyond that, part of the struggle for the full rehabilitation of our continent. Thus, women's emancipation is at the heart of the question of humanity itself, here and everywhere. The question is thus universal in character.

### **The class struggle and the worldwide status of women**

We undoubtedly owe it to dialectical materialism for having shed the greatest light on the problem of the conditions women

face, allowing us to lay out the problem of the exploitation of women in the framework of a general system of exploitation.

Dialectical materialism defines human society not as a natural, unchangeable fact, but as something working on nature. Humankind does not submit passively to the power of nature. It takes control over this power. This process is not an internal or subjective one. It takes place objectively in practice, once women cease to be viewed as mere sexual beings and we look beyond their biological functions and become conscious of their weight as an active social force.

What is more, woman's consciousness of herself is not only a product of her sexuality. It reflects her position as determined by the economic structure of society, which in turn expresses the level reached by humankind in technological development and relations between classes. The importance of dialectical materialism lies in having gone beyond essential biological limits and simplistic theories about our being slaves to nature and having laid out the facts in their social and economic context.

From the first beginnings of human history, man's mastering of nature has never been accomplished with his bare hands alone. The hand with the opposable thumb reaches out for the tool, which increases the hand's power. It was thus not physical attributes alone—musculature or the capacity to give birth, for example—that determined the unequal status of men and women. Nor was it technological progress as such that institutionalized this inequality. In certain cases, in certain parts of the globe, women were able to eliminate the physical difference that separated them from men.

It was rather the transition from one form of society to another that served to institutionalize women's inequality. This inequality was produced by our own minds and intelligence in order to develop a concrete form of domination and exploitation. The social function and role to which women have been relegated ever since is a living reflection of this fact. Today, her childbearing functions and the social obligation to conform to

models of elegance determined by men prevent any woman who might want to from developing a so-called male musculature.

For millennia, from the Paleolithic to the Bronze Age, relations between the sexes were, in the opinion of the most skilled paleontologists, positive and complementary in character. So it was for eight millennia! As Frederick Engels explained to us, relations were based on collaboration and interaction, in contrast to the patriarchy, where women's exclusion was a generalized characteristic of the epoch. Engels not only traced the evolution of technology but also of the historic enslavement of women, which occurred with the appearance of private property, when one mode of production gave way to another, and when one form of social organization replaced another.

With the intensive labor required to clear the forests, cultivate the fields, and put the natural resources to best use, a division of labor developed. Self-interest, laziness, indolence—in short, taking the most for oneself with the least effort—emerged from the depths of the human spirit and became elevated into principles.

The protective tenderness of the woman toward the family and the clan became a trap that delivered her up to domination by the male. Innocence and generosity fell victim to deceit and base motives. Love was made a mockery of and human dignity scorned. All genuine human feelings were transformed into objects of barter. From this moment on, women's hospitality and desire to share were overpowered by cunning and treachery.

Though conscious of this treachery, which imposed on her an unequal share of the burdens, the woman followed the man in order to care for all that she loved. For his part, the man exploited her great self-sacrifice to the hilt. Later, this seed of criminal exploitation was set in terrible social imperatives, going far beyond the conscious concessions made by the woman, historically betrayed.

Humankind first knew slavery with the advent of private property. Man, master of his slaves and of the land, became in addi-

tion the woman's master. This was the historic defeat of the female sex. It came about with the upheaval in the division of labor and as a result of new modes of production and a revolution in the means of production. In this way, paternal right replaced maternal right. Property was now handed down from father to son, rather than as before from the woman to her clan. The patriarchal family made its appearance, founded on the sole and personal property of the father, who had become head of the family. Within this family the woman was oppressed. Reigning supreme, the man satisfied his sexual whims by mating with his slaves or courtesans.

Women became his booty, his conquest in trade. He profited from their labor power and took his fill from the myriad of pleasures they afforded him. For their part, as soon as the masters gave them the chance, women took revenge in infidelity. Thus adultery became the natural counterpart to marriage. It was the woman's only form of self-defense against the domestic slavery to which she was subjected. Her social oppression was a direct reflection of her economic oppression.

Given this cycle of violence, inequality can be done away with only by establishing a new society, where men and women will enjoy equal rights, resulting from an upheaval in the means of production and in all social relations. Thus, the status of women will improve only with the elimination of the system that exploits them. In fact, throughout the ages and wherever the patriarchy has triumphed, there has been a close parallel between class exploitation and women's inferior status. Of course, there were brighter periods where women, priestesses or female warriors, broke out of their oppressive chains. But the essential features of her subjugation have survived and been consolidated, both in everyday activity and in intellectual and moral repression.

Her status overturned by private property, banished from her very self, relegated to the role of child raiser and servant, written out of history by philosophy (Aristotle, Pythagoras, and others) and the most entrenched religions, stripped of all worth by

mythology, woman shared the lot of a slave, who in slave society was nothing more than a beast of burden with a human face.

So it is not surprising that in its phase of conquest the capitalist system, for which human beings are just so many numbers, should be the economic system that has exploited women the most brazenly and with the most sophistication. So, we are told, manufacturers in those days employed only women on their mechanized looms. They gave preference to women who were married and, among them, to those with a family at home to support. These women paid greater attention to their work than single women and were more docile, having no choice but to work to the point of exhaustion to earn the barest subsistence for their families. So we can see how women's particular attributes are turned against her, and all the most moral and delicate qualities of her nature become the means by which she is subjugated. Her tenderness, her love for her family, the meticulous care she takes with her work—all this is used against her, even as she guards herself against any weaknesses she might have.

Thus, throughout the ages and throughout different types of society, women suffered a sorry fate, in a continually reinforced position of inferiority to men. Though her inequality was expressed in many and varied guises, she remained unequal.

In slave society, the male slave was looked upon as an animal, a means of production of goods and services. The woman, whatever her social rank, was crushed not only within her own class, but by other classes too. This was the case even for women who belonged to the exploiting classes. In feudal society, women were kept in a state of absolute dependence on men, justified by reference to women's supposed physical and psychological weakness. Often seen as a defiled object, a primary agent of indiscretion, women, with a few rare exceptions, were kept out of places of worship. In capitalist society, the woman, already morally and socially persecuted, is also subjugated economically. Kept by the man if she does not work, even then she works herself to death.

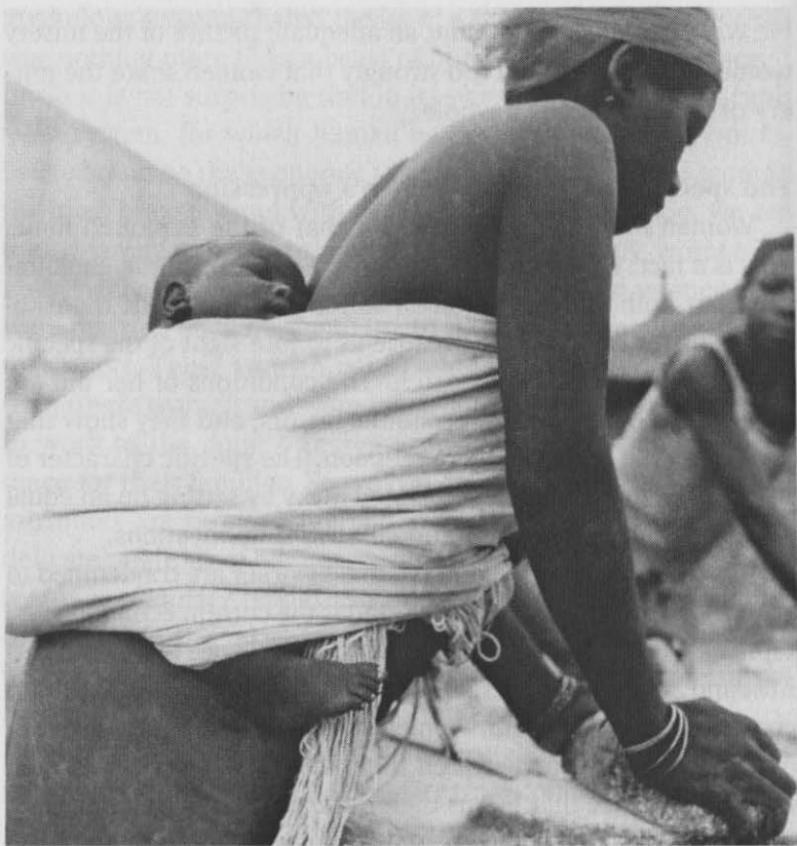
We will never be able to paint an adequate picture of the misery women suffer, nor show too strongly that women share the misery of proletarians as a whole.

### **The specific character of women's oppression**

Woman's fate is bound up with that of the exploited male. This is a fact. However, this solidarity, arising from the exploitation that both men and women suffer and that binds them together historically, must not cause us to lose sight of the specific reality of the woman's situation. The conditions of her life are determined by more than economic factors, and they show that she is a victim of a specific oppression. The specific character of this oppression cannot be explained away by setting up an equal sign or by falling into easy and childish simplifications.

It is true that both she and the male worker are condemned to silence by their exploitation. But under the current economic system, the worker's wife is also condemned to silence by her worker-husband. In other words, in addition to the class exploitation common to both of them, women must confront a particular set of relations that exist between them and men, relations of conflict and violence that use as their pretext physical differences. It is clear that the difference between the sexes is a feature of human society. This difference characterizes particular relations that immediately prevent us from viewing women, even in production, simply as female workers. The existence of relations of privilege, of relations that spell danger for the woman, all this means that women's reality constitutes an ongoing problem for us.

The male uses the complex nature of these relations as an excuse to sow confusion among women. He takes advantage of all the shrewdness that class exploitation has to offer in order to maintain his domination over women. This is the same method used by men to dominate other men in other lands. The idea was established that certain men, by virtue of their family origin and birth, or by divine right, were superior to others. This was the basis for the feudal system. Other men have managed to



UN PHOTO

**Village woman grinds millet, May 1983.**

enslave whole peoples in this way. They used their origins, or arguments based on their skin color, as a supposedly scientific justification for dominating those who were unfortunate enough to have skin of a different color. This is what colonial domination and apartheid are based on.

We must pay the closest attention to women's situation because it pushes the best of them into waging a sex war when it's a question of waging, at bottom and in a complementary manner, a clan or class war. We have to say frankly that it is the attitude of men that makes such confusion possible. It is men's attitude that spawns the bold assertions made by feminism, certain

of which have not been without value in the war that men and women are waging against oppression. This war is one we can and will win—if we understand that we need one another and are complementary, that we share the same fate, and in fact, that we are condemned to interdependence.

At this moment, we have little choice but to recognize that masculine behavior comprises vanity, irresponsibility, arrogance, and violence of all kinds toward women. This kind of behavior can hardly lead to coordinated action against women's oppression. And we must say frankly that such attitudes, which can sink to the level of sheer stupidity, are in reality nothing but a safety valve for the oppressed male, who, through brutalizing his wife, hopes to regain some of the human dignity denied him by the system of exploitation. This masculine foolishness is called sexism or machismo. It includes all kinds of moral and intellectual feebleness—even thinly veiled physical weakness—which often gives politically conscious women no choice but to consider it their duty to wage a war on two fronts.

In order to fight and win, women must identify with the oppressed layers and classes of society, such as workers and peasants, etc. The man, however, no matter how oppressed he is, has another human being to oppress: his wife. To say this is, without any doubt, to affirm a terrible fact. When we talk about the vile system of apartheid, for example, our thoughts and emotions turn to the exploited and oppressed Blacks. But we forget the Black woman who has to endure her husband—this man who, armed with his passbook, allows himself all kinds of reprehensible detours before returning home to the woman who has waited for him so worthily, in such privation and destitution. We should keep in mind, too, the white woman of South Africa. Aristocratic, with every possible material comfort, she is, unfortunately, still a tool for the pleasure of the lecherous white man. The only thing these men can do to blot out the terrible crimes they commit against Blacks is to engage in drunken brawls and perverse, bestial sexual behavior.

And there is no lack of examples of men, otherwise progressive, who live cheerfully in adultery, but who are prepared to murder their wives on the merest suspicion of infidelity. How many men in Burkina seek so-called consolation in the arms of prostitutes and mistresses of all kinds! And this is not to mention the irresponsible husbands whose wages go to keep mistresses or fill the coffers of bar owners.

And what should we think of those little men, also progressive, who get together in sleazy places to talk about the women they have taken advantage of? They think this is the way they will be able to measure up to other men and even humiliate some of them, by having seduced their wives. In reality, such men are pitiful and insignificant. They would not even enter our discussion if it were not for the fact that their criminal behavior has been undermining the morale and virtue of many fine women whose contribution to our revolution could be of the utmost importance.

And then there are those more-or-less revolutionary militants—much less revolutionary than more—who do not accept that their wives should also be politically active; or who allow them to be active by day and by day only; or who beat their wives because they have gone out to meetings or to a demonstration at night.

Oh, these suspicious, jealous men! What narrow-mindedness! And what a limited, partial commitment! For is it only at night that a woman who is disenchanted and determined can deceive her husband? And what is this political commitment that expects her to stop political activity at nightfall and resume her rights and responsibilities only at daybreak? And, finally, what should we make of remarks about women made by all kinds of activists, the one more revolutionary than the next, remarks such as “women are despicably materialist,” “manipulators,” “clowns,” “liars,” “gossips,” “schemers,” “jealous,” and so on? Maybe this is all true of women. But surely it is equally true of men.

Could our society be any less perverse than this when it systematically burdens women down, keeps them away from any-

thing that is supposed to be serious and of consequence, and excludes them from anything other than the most petty and minor activities!

When you are condemned, as women are, to wait for your lord and master at home in order to feed him and receive his permission to speak or just to be alive, what else do you have to keep you occupied and to give you at least the illusion of being useful other than meaningful glances, gossip, chatter, furtive envious glances at others, and the bad-mouthing of their flirtations and private lives? The same attitudes are found among men put in the same situation.

Another thing we say about women, alas, is that they are always forgetful. We even call them birdbrains. But we must never forget that a woman's whole life is dominated—tormented—by a fickle, unfaithful, and irresponsible husband and by her children and their problems. Completely worn out by attending to the entire family, how could she not have haggard eyes that reflect distraction and absentmindedness. For her, forgetting becomes an antidote to the suffering, a relief from the harshness of her existence, a vital self-defense mechanism.

But there are forgetful men, too—a lot of them. Some forget by indulging in drink or drugs, others through the various kinds of perversity they engage in throughout life. Does anyone ever say that these men are forgetful? What vanity! What banality! Banalities, though, that men revel in as a way of concealing the weaknesses of the masculine universe, because this masculine universe in an exploitative society needs female prostitutes. We say that both the female and the prostitute are scapegoats. We defile them and when we are done with them we sacrifice them on the altar of prosperity of a system of lies and plunder.

Prostitution is nothing but the microcosm of a society where exploitation is a general rule. It is a symbol of the contempt men have for women. And yet this woman is none other than the painful figure of the mother, sister, or wife of other men, thus of every one of us. In the final analysis, it is the unconscious con-

tempt we have for ourselves. There can be prostitutes only as long as there are pimps and those who seek prostitutes.

But who frequents prostitutes? First, there are the husbands who commit their wives to chastity, while they relieve their depravity and debauchery upon the prostitute. This allows them to treat their wives with a seeming respect, while they reveal their true nature at the bosom of the lady of so-called pleasure. So on the moral plane prostitution becomes the counterpart to marriage. Tradition, customs, religion, and moral doctrines alike seem to have no difficulty adapting themselves to it. This is what our church fathers mean when they explain that "sewers are needed to assure the cleanliness of the palace."

Then there are the unrepentant and intemperate pleasure seekers who are afraid to take on the responsibility of a home with its ups and downs, and who flee from the moral and material responsibility of fatherhood. So they discreetly seek out the address of a brothel, a gold mine of relations that entail no responsibility on their part.

There is also a whole bevy of men who, publicly at least and in "proper" company, subject women to public humiliation because of some grudge they have not had the strength of character to surmount, thus losing confidence in all women, who become from then on "tools of the devil." Or else they do so out of hypocrisy, proclaiming their contempt for the female sex too often and categorically, a contempt that they strive to assume in the eyes of the public from which they have extorted admiration through false pretenses. All these men end up night after night in brothels until occasionally their hypocrisy is discovered.

Then there is the weakness of the man who is looking for a polyandrous arrangement. Far be it for us to make a value judgment on polyandry, which was the dominant form of relations between men and women in certain societies. What we are denouncing here are the courts of idle, moneygrubbing gigolos lavishly kept by rich ladies.

Within this same system, prostitution can, economically speak-



MARGARET A. NOVICKI/AFRICA REPORT

**Weaver in Bombore, Burkina Faso.**

ing, include both the prostitute and the "materialist-minded" married woman. The only difference between the woman who sells her body by prostitution and she who sells herself in marriage is the price and duration of the contract. So, by tolerating the existence of prostitution, we relegate all our women to the same rank: that of a prostitute or wife. The only difference between the two is that the legal wife, though still oppressed, at least has the benefit of the stamp of respectability that marriage confers. As for the prostitute, all that remains for her is the market value of her body, a value that fluctuates according to the size of the male chauvinist's wallet.

Isn't she just an object that increases or decreases in value according to the degree to which her charms wilt? Isn't she governed by the law of supply and demand? Prostitution is a tragic and painful representation of female slavery in all its forms.

We should see in every prostitute an accusing finger pointing firmly at society as a whole. Every pimp, every partner in prostitution, turns the knife in this festering and gaping wound that disfigures the world of man and leads to his ruin. In fighting against prostitution, in holding out a saving hand to the prostitute, we are saving our mothers, our sisters, and our wives from this social leprosy. We are saving ourselves. We are saving the world.

### **Women's reality in Burkina Faso**

If society sees the birth of a boy as a "gift from God," the birth of a girl is greeted as an act of fate, or at best, an offering that can serve in the production of food and the perpetuation of the human race.

The little male will be taught how to want and get, to demand and be served, to desire and take, to decide things without being questioned. The future woman, however, is dealt blow after blow by a society that unanimously, as one man—and "as one man" is the appropriate term—drums into her head norms that lead nowhere. A psychological straitjacket called virtue produces a spirit of personal alienation within her. A preoccupation with being protected is nurtured in the child's mind, inclining her to seek the supervision of a guardian or drawing her into marriage. What a monstrous mental fraud! This child knows no childhood. From the age of three, she must be true to her role in life: *to serve and be useful*.

While her brother of four or five will play till he drops from exhaustion or boredom, she, with little ceremony, will enter into production. She already has a trade: assistant housewife. It is an occupation without pay since, as is generally said, a housewife "does nothing." Do we not write "housewife" on the identity cards

of women who have no income, signifying that they have no job, that they are "not working"? With the help of tradition and obligatory submissiveness, our sisters grow up more and more dependent, more and more dominated, more and more exploited, and with less and less free time for leisure.

While the young man's road is strewn with opportunities to develop himself and take charge of his life, at every new stage of the young girl's life the social straitjacket is pulled tighter around her. She will pay a heavy price for having been born female. And she will pay it throughout her whole life, until the weight of her toil and the effects of her physical and mental self-negation lead her to the day of eternal rest. She is an instrument of production at the side of her mother, who is already more of a matron than a mother. She never sits idle, is never left to her games and toys like her brother.

Whichever direction we turn—from the central plateau in the northeast, dominated by societies where power is highly centralized; to the west, where the powers of the village communities are decentralized; or to the southwest, the land of scattered collectives—the traditional form of social organization has at least one point in common: the subjugation of women. In our 8,000 villages, on our 600,000 plots of land, and in our million and more households, on the question of women we can see identical or similar approaches.

From one end of the country to the other, social cohesion as defined by men requires the subjugation of women and the subordination of the young. Our society, still too primitively agrarian, patriarchal, and polygamous by far, turns the woman into an object of exploitation for her labor power and of consumption for her reproductive capacity.

How do women manage to live out this peculiar dual identity, which makes them, at one and the same time, the vital knot that ties together the whole family by their presence and attention, guarantees its fundamental unity, and yet also makes them marginalized and ignored? The woman leads a twofold exist-

ence indeed, the depth of her social ostracism being equaled only by her own stoic endurance. In order to be able to live in harmony with the society of man, in order to obey his command, she envelopes herself in demeaning and self-effacing detachment. She sacrifices herself to this.

Woman, you are the source of life, yet an object; mother, yet domestic servant; nurturer, yet pseudowoman; you can do the bidding of both soil and hearth, yet you are invisible, faceless, and voiceless. You are the pivot, the unifier, yet a being in chains, shadow of the male shadow.

The woman is the pillar of family well-being, the midwife, washerwoman, cleaner, and cook. She is errand-runner, matron, farmer, healer, gardener, grinder, saleswoman, worker. She is labor power working with obsolete tools, putting in hundreds of thousands of hours for a hopeless level of production.

Every day our sisters, fighting as they are on the four fronts of our war against disease, hunger, poverty, and degeneracy, feel the pressure of changes over which they have no control. For every single one of the 800,000 males who emigrate from Burkina, a woman takes on an additional load. The two million Burkinabè men who live outside the country thus exacerbate the sexual imbalance that puts women today at 51.7 percent of the total population, or 52.1 percent of the potentially active population.

Too overburdened to give the necessary attention to her children, too exhausted to think of herself, the woman continues to slave away—the grinding wheel, wheel of fortune, drive wheel, spare wheel, the big wheel. Broken on the wheel and bullied, women, our sisters and wives, pay for creating life, for sustaining life. Socially they are relegated to third place, after the man and the child—just like the Third World, arbitrarily held back, the better to be dominated and exploited. Subjugated, the woman goes from a protective guardian who exploits her to one who dominates her and exploits her even more.

She is first to work and last to rest. She is first to fetch water and wood, first at the fire, yet last to quench her thirst. She may

eat only if there is food left and then only after the man. She is the very keystone of the family, carrying both family and society on her shoulders, in her hands, and in her belly. In return, she is paid with oppressive, pro-population-growth ideology, food taboos, overwork, and malnutrition. Society rewards her with dangerous pregnancies, self-effacement, and innumerable other evils that make maternal deaths one of the most intolerable, unspeakable, and shameful defects of our society.

Predatory intruders come to this bedrock of alienation from afar and foment the isolation of women, making their condition even more precarious. The euphoria of independence left women with all hopes dashed. Segregated off during negotiations, absent from all decisions, vulnerable, and at the mercy of all, she has continued to be victim to family and society. Capital and bureaucracy have banded together to maintain her subjugation. Imperialism has done the rest.

With an education level only half that of men and with little training in skilled trades, women are 99 percent illiterate, are discriminated against in the job market and confined to secondary jobs, and are the first to be harassed and fired. Yet burdened as they are by a hundred traditions and a thousand excuses, never seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, women have continued to rise to challenge after challenge. They have had to keep going, whatever the cost, for the sake of their children, their family, and for society in general.

Capitalism needed cotton, shea nuts, and sesame for its industries. Women, our mothers, in addition to all the tasks they were already carrying out, found themselves responsible for harvesting these too.

In the towns, where civilization is supposedly a liberating force for women, they have found themselves decorating bourgeois parlors, selling their bodies to survive, or serving as commercial bait for advertising. Women from the petty bourgeoisie no doubt live better on an economic level than women in the countryside. But are they really freer, more liberated, or more

respected? Are they really entrusted with more responsibility? We must do more than ask questions in this regard. We must take a stand.

Many problems still persist, whether in the domain of jobs, access to education, women's status in legal codes, or even just at the level of everyday life: the Burkinabè woman still remains the one who follows the man, rather than going side by side.

The different neocolonial regimes that have been in power in Burkina have had no better than a bourgeois approach to women's emancipation, which brought only the illusion of freedom and dignity. It was bound to remain that way as long as only a few petty-bourgeois women from the towns were concerned with the latest fad in feminist politics—or rather primitive feminism—which demanded the right of the woman to be masculine. Thus the creation of the Ministry of Women, headed by a woman, was touted as a victory. Did we really understand the situation faced by women? Did we realize we were talking about the living conditions of 52 percent of the Burkinabè population? Did we understand that these conditions were the product of entire social, political, and economic infrastructures and pervasive backward conceptions, and that their transformation therefore could not rest with a single ministry, even if this were led by a woman? The answer is very clear. The women of Burkina were able to ascertain after several years of this ministry's existence that nothing had changed for them.

And it could not be otherwise, given that the approach to the question of women's liberation that led to the creation of this pseudoministry refused to recognize, show, and take into account the real cause of women's subjugation and exploitation. So we should not be surprised that, despite the existence of this ministry, prostitution grew, women's access to education and jobs did not improve, their civil and political rights were ignored, and the general conditions of their lives in town and countryside alike improved not one iota. Female trinket, sham female politician, female temptress, obedient female voter in elections,

female robot in the kitchen, female frustrated by the passivity and restrictions imposed on her despite her open mind—wherever the female is placed in the spectrum of pain, whether she suffers the urban or the rural way, she continues to suffer!

But one single night placed women at the heart of the family's development and at the center of national solidarity. The dawn that followed the night of August 4, 1983, brought liberty with it, calling all of us to march together side by side in equality, as a single people joined by common goals. The August revolution found the Burkinabè woman in her state of subjugation, exploited by a neocolonial society deeply imbued with the ideology of backward social forces. She owed it to herself to break with these reactionary political views on women's emancipation, so widely praised and followed until then. She owed it to herself to draw up with utmost clarity a new, just, and revolutionary political approach to her liberation.

### **Women's emancipation and the Burkina revolution**

On October 2, 1983, in the Political Orientation Speech, the National Council of the Revolution laid out clearly the main axis of the fight for women's liberation. It made a commitment to work to mobilize, organize, and unify all the active forces of the nation, particularly women.



PAT HUNT/MILITANT

**Women combatants on parade, August 1985.**

The Political Orientation Speech had this to say specifically in regard to women: "Women will be an integral part of all the battles we will have to wage against the various shackles of neo-colonial society and for the construction of a new society. They will take part in all levels of the organization of the life of the nation as a whole, from conceiving projects to making decisions and implementing them. The final goal of this great undertaking is to build a free and prosperous society in which women will be equal to men in all domains."

There can be no clearer way to conceptualize and explain the question of women and the liberation struggle ahead of us. "The genuine emancipation of women is that which entrusts responsibilities to them and involves them in productive activity and in the different struggles the people face. Women's genuine emancipation is one that exacts men's respect and consideration."

What is clearly indicated here, sister comrades, is that the struggle to liberate women is above all your struggle to deepen our democratic and popular revolution, a revolution that grants you from this moment on the right to speak and act in building a new society of justice and equality, in which men and women have the same rights and responsibilities. The democratic and popular revolution has created the conditions for such a liberating struggle. It now falls to you to act with the greatest sense of responsibility in breaking through all the shackles and obstacles that enslave women in backward societies like ours and to assume your share of the responsibilities in the political fight to build a new society at the service of Africa and all humanity.

In the very first hours of the democratic and popular revolution we said that "emancipation, like freedom, is not granted but conquered. It is for women themselves to put forward their demands and mobilize to win them." The revolution has not only laid out the objectives of the struggle for women's liberation but has also indicated the road to be followed and the methods to be used, as well as the main actors in this battle. We have now been working together, men and women, for four years in

order to achieve success and come closer to our final goal. We should note the battles waged and the victories won, as well as the setbacks suffered and the difficulties encountered. This will aid us in preparing and leading future struggles.

So what tasks does our democratic and popular revolution have in respect to women's emancipation? What acquisitions do we have, and what obstacles still remain? One of the main acquisitions of the revolution with regard to women's emancipation was, without any doubt, the establishment of the Women's Union of Burkina (UFB). This is a major acquisition because it has provided the women of our country with a framework and a solid mechanism with which to wage a successful fight. Establishing the UFB represents a big victory in that it allows for the mobilization of all politically active women around well-defined and just objectives, under the leadership of the National Council of the Revolution.

The UFB is an organization of militant and serious women who are determined to change things, to fight until they win, to fall and fall again, but to get back on their feet and go forward without retreating. This is the new consciousness that has taken root among the women of Burkina, and we should all be proud of it. Comrades, the Women's Union of Burkina is your combat weapon. It belongs to you. Sharpen it again and again so that its blade will cut more deeply, bringing you ever-greater victories.

The different initiatives directed at women's emancipation that the government has taken over a period of a little more than three years are certainly inadequate. But they have put us on the right road, to the point where our country can present itself as being in the vanguard of the battle to liberate women. Women of Burkina participate more and more in decision making and in the real exercise of popular power. They are present everywhere the country is being built. You can find them at every work site: in the Sourou [Valley irrigation project], in our reforestation programs, in vaccination brigades, in Operation Clean Town, in the Battle for the Railroad, and so on.

Step by step, the women of Burkina have gained a foothold everywhere, asserting themselves and demolishing all the male chauvinist, backward conceptions of men. And this process will go on until women are present in Burkina's entire social and professional fabric. For three and a half years our revolution has worked to systematically eliminate all practices that demean women, such as prostitution and related activity, like vagrancy and female juvenile delinquency, forced marriages, female circumcision,<sup>1</sup> and their particularly difficult living conditions.

By working to solve the water problem; by building windmills in the villages; by assuring the widespread use of the improved stove; by building public nurseries, carrying out daily vaccinations, and encouraging healthy, abundant, and varied eating habits, the revolution has no doubt greatly contributed to improving the quality of women's lives. Women, for their part, must commit themselves to greater involvement in the fight against imperialism. They should be firm in producing and consuming Burkinabè goods, and, as producers and consumers of locally produced goods, always strive to be a major factor in our economy.

Though the August revolution has already done much for the emancipation of women, this is still far from adequate. Much remains to be done. And in order to continue our work and do it even better, we must be more aware of the difficulties still to be overcome. They are many. At the very top of the list are the problems of illiteracy and low political consciousness. Both of these problems are intensified by the inordinate influence reactionary social forces exert in backward societies like ours. We must work with perseverance to overcome these two main obstacles. As long as women do not have a clear appreciation of the just nature of the political battle to be fought and do not see clearly how to take it forward, we can easily run around in circles and eventually slip backwards.

This is why the UFB must fully assume its responsibilities. Its members must strive to overcome their own weaknesses and break with the kind of practices and behavior traditionally

thought of as female—behavior we unfortunately often still see today. I am talking here about all those petty meannesses like jealousy, exhibitionism, continual empty, negative, and unprincipled criticism, mutual defamation, supersensitive subjectivity, and rivalries. Revolutionary women must overcome this kind of behavior, which is particularly acute on the part of petty-bourgeois women. It jeopardizes all collective effort, while the fight for women's liberation is one that must be organized, thus entailing the combined contribution of all women.

We must collectively remain alert to women's access to productive work. It is this work that emancipates and liberates women by assuring them economic independence and a greater social role, as well as a more complete and accurate understanding of the world.

Our view of the economic power women need has nothing in common with the crude greed and crass materialism of certain women who are literally like stock market speculators or walking safes. These women lose all their dignity and self-control, not to mention their principles, as soon as they hear the clinking of jewelry or the snapping of bank notes. Some of them unfortunately push their husbands deep into debt, even to embezzlement and corruption. They are like dangerous, sticky, fetid mud stifling the revolutionary fervor of their husbands or companions. We find such sad cases where the man's revolutionary flame has burned out, and where the husband's commitment to the cause of the people has been abandoned for the sake of a selfish, jealous, and envious shrew.

The education and economic emancipation of women, if not well understood and channeled in a constructive direction, can be a source of misfortune for the woman and thus for society as a whole. The educated and economically independent woman is sought after as lover and wife in good times and abandoned as soon as bad times arrive. Society passes a merciless judgment on them. An educated woman "has trouble finding a husband," it is said. The woman with independent means is suspect. They

are all condemned to remain single—which would not be a problem if being single were not the cause for general ostracism from society—innocent victims who do not understand their crime or their defect, frustrated because every day is like a depressant pushing them to become cantankerous and hypochondriacs. For many women great knowledge has been the cause of heartbreak, and great fortune has spawned many a misfortune.

The solution to this apparent paradox lies in the ability of these unfortunate rich and educated women to place their great wealth and knowledge at the service of the people. By doing this, they will be all the more appreciated and admired by the many people to whom they have been able to bring a little happiness. How could such women possibly feel alone in these conditions? How could they not know emotional fulfillment when they have taken their love of themselves and turned it into love of others?

Our women must not pull back in the face of the many different aspects of their struggle, which leads them to courageously and proudly take full charge of their own lives and discover the happiness of being themselves, not the domesticated female of the male. Even today many of our women put themselves under a man's cover as the surest solution to oppressive gossip. They marry without love or joy, just to serve some boor, some dreary male who is far removed from real life and cut off from the struggles of the people.

Often, women will simultaneously demand some haughty independence and at the same time protection, or, even worse, to be put under the colonial protectorate of a male. They do not believe that they can live otherwise. No. We must say again to our sisters that marriage, if it brings society nothing positive and does not bring them happiness, is not indispensable and should even be avoided.

Let us show them our many examples of hardy and fearless pioneers, single women with or without children, who are radiant and blossoming, overflowing with richness and availability for others—even envied by unhappily married women, because

of the warmth they generate and the happiness they draw from their freedom, dignity, and willingness to help others.

Women have shown sufficient proof of their ability to manage the home and raise children—in short, to be responsible members of society—without the oppressive tutelage of a man. Our society is surely sufficiently advanced to put an end to this banishment of the single woman. Comrade revolutionaries, we should see to it that marriage is a choice that adds something positive, and not some kind of lottery where we know what the ticket costs us, but have no idea what we will end up winning. Human feelings are too noble to be subject to such games.

Another sure source of the problem is the feudal, reactionary, and passive attitude of many men who by their behavior continue to hold things back. They have absolutely no intention of jeopardizing the total control they have over women, either at home or in society in general. In the struggle to build a new society, which is a revolutionary struggle, these men place themselves on the side of reaction and counterrevolution by their conduct. For the revolution cannot triumph without the genuine emancipation of women.

So, comrades, we must be highly conscious of all these difficulties in order to better face future battles. The woman, like the man, has qualities and weaknesses—which undoubtedly proves that she is equal to man. Placing the emphasis deliberately on woman's qualities in no way means we have an idealistic vision of her. We simply aim to single out her qualities and capacities that men and society have always hidden in order to justify her exploitation and subjugation.

### **How should we organize ourselves to accelerate the march forward to emancipation?**

Though our resources are ridiculously small, our goals are ambitious. The will to go forward, our firm conviction, is not sufficient to win. We must marshal our forces, organize them, and channel them all toward winning our struggle.



**Burkina rally in solidarity with the freedom struggle in Namibia.**

Emancipation has been a topic of discussion in our country for more than two decades now. It has been an emotional discussion. Today, we must approach the question in its overall context. We must not shirk our responsibility by failing to bring all possible forces into the struggle and leaving this pivotal question of women's emancipation off to the side. We must likewise avoid rushing out ahead, leaving far behind those, especially the women, who should be on the front lines.

At the governmental level, guided by the directives of the National Council of the Revolution, a consistent plan of action to benefit women will be implemented involving all the different ministerial departments and assigning the short- and medium-term responsibility of each. This plan of action, far from being a list of pious wishes and other feelings of pity, should be a guide to stepping up revolutionary action, since it is in the heat of struggle that important and decisive victories are won.

This plan of action should be conceived by ourselves, for ourselves. Our wide-ranging, democratic discussions should produce bold resolutions that build our confidence in women. What do men and women want for women? This is what we will include in our plan of action. This plan, by involving all the ministerial departments, will be a sharp break from the approach of treating the question of women's equality as a side issue, relieving of responsibility those who, through their daily activity, should have and could have made a significant contribution to solving this problem.

This many-sided approach to women's emancipation flows directly from our scientific analysis of the origins and source of their oppression and the importance of this struggle to the building of a new society free from all forms of exploitation and oppression. We are not pleading for anyone to condescendingly do women a favor. We are demanding, in the name of the revolution—whose purpose is to give, not to take—that justice be done to women.

From now on, every ministry and the administrative committee of each ministry, in addition to the usual overall assessment we make, will be judged according to their success in implementing this plan. So our statistical analyses will necessarily include action taken of direct benefit or concern to women.

The question of women's equality must be uppermost in the mind of all those making decisions, at all times, and in all the different phases of conceiving and executing plans for development. Conceiving a development project without women's participation is like using only four fingers when we have ten. It is an invitation to failure.

On the level of ministries charged with education, we must be doubly alert to women's access to education. Education constitutes a qualitative step toward emancipation. It is an obvious fact that wherever women have had access to education, their march to equality has been accelerated. Emerging from the darkness of ignorance allows women to transmit and use the tools of

knowledge in order to place themselves at the disposal of society. All those different ridiculous and backward concepts that hold that only education for males is important and profitable, and that educating women is an extravagance, must be wiped out in Burkina Faso.

Parents must accord the same attention to the progress of their daughters at school as they do to their sons, their pride and joy. Girls have proven that they are the equals of boys at school, if not simply better. But above all they have the right to education in order to learn and know, to be free. In future literacy campaigns, the rate of participation by women must be raised to correspond with their numerical weight in the population. It would be too great an injustice to maintain such an important part of the population—half, in fact—in ignorance.

On the level of the ministries of labor and justice, texts should constantly be kept in line with the transformation our society has been going through since August 4, 1983, so that equality between men and women can be a tangible reality. The new labor code, now being debated and prepared, should express how profoundly our people aspire to social justice. It should mark an important stage in the work of destroying the neocolonial state apparatus, a class apparatus fashioned by reactionary regimes in order to perpetuate the system that oppressed the masses, especially women.

How could we continue to accept that a woman doing the same work as a man should earn less? Can we continue to accept dowries and forcing widows to marry their brothers-in-law, which reduce our sisters and mothers to common commodities to be bartered for? There are so many medieval laws still imposed on our people, particularly women, that it is only just that, finally, justice be done.

In the ministries in charge of culture and family affairs, particular emphasis will be put on developing a new mentality in social relations. This will be done in close collaboration with the Women's Union of Burkina. In the framework of our revolution,

our mothers and wives have important and particular contributions to make to the revolutionary transformation of society. The education of our children, efficient management of the family budget, family planning, the forging of a family spirit, patriotism—these are all important attributes that should effectively contribute to the birth of a revolutionary morality and an anti-imperialist life-style, all preludes to a new society.

In the home, women should take particular care to participate fully in improving the quality of life. As Burkinabè, living well means eating well and wearing clothes made in Burkina. It means keeping a clean and pleasant home, because this in itself has an important impact on relations within the family. Living in squalor produces squalid relations. Look at pigs if you don't believe me.

And the transformation of our mentality would be incomplete if the new woman is stuck living with a man of the old kind. Where is men's superiority complex more pernicious, yet more crucial, than in the home where the mother, a guilty accomplice, teaches her offspring sexist and unequal rules? Such women perpetuate sexual complexes right from the beginning of a child's education and the formation of its character.

In addition, what use are our efforts to draw someone into political activity during the day if this newly involved comrade finds himself with a reactionary and demobilizing woman at night!

And what about housework, this all-consuming, brutalizing work that has a tendency to turn you into robots and leave no time or energy to think! This is why we need resolute action directed toward men and at implementing a large-scale network of social services such as nurseries, day-care centers, and cafeterias. This would allow women to more easily take part in revolutionary debate and action. Each child, whether rejected as the mother's failure or doted on as the father's pride, should be of concern to society as a whole, every one the object of society's attention and affection. Men and women will, from now on, share all the tasks in the home.

The plan of action to benefit women should be a revolutionary tool aimed at the general mobilization of all our political and administrative structures for women's emancipation. Comrades, I repeat, before it can correspond to the real needs of women, this plan must be subjected to a democratic discussion at every level of the UFB's structures.

The UFB is a revolutionary organization. As such, it is a school for popular democracy, governed by the organizational principles of criticism and self-criticism and democratic centralism. It should dissociate itself from those organizations where mystification has won out over concrete objectives. Such a demarcation can be a permanent and effective acquisition only if the comrades of the UFB carry out a resolute struggle against the weaknesses that unfortunately still persist in some female milieus. We are not talking here about rallying women for appearance' sake or for any other electoralist, demagogic, or otherwise reprehensible ulterior motive. We are talking about assembling women fighters to win victories.

We must fight in an orderly way and around a program of action decided democratically within the different committees, taking fully into account each revolutionary structure's framework of organizational autonomy. Every leader of the Women's Union of Burkina must be completely absorbed in the responsibilities she has in her particular structure in order to be effective in action. The UFB needs to carry out vast political and ideological educational campaigns among its leaders in order to strengthen its organization and structures on all levels.

Comrades, members of the UFB, your union, our union, must participate fully in the class struggle on the side of the masses. Those millions whose consciousness was dormant and who have now been awakened by the advent of the revolution represent a formidable force. On August 4, 1983, we Burkinabè made a decision to rely on our own resources, which means in large part on the resources that you, the women of Burkina, represent. In order to be useful, your energies have to be focused as one on

the struggle to eliminate imperialism's economic domination and every breed of exploiter. As a tool for mobilization, the UFB will have to work to forge a highly developed political awareness on the part of its members, so that they can throw themselves totally into accomplishing the different actions the government undertakes to improve the situation of women.

Comrades, only the revolutionary transformation of our society can create the conditions for your liberation. You are dominated by both imperialism and by men. In every male languishes the soul of a feudal lord, a male chauvinist, which must be destroyed. This is why you must eagerly embrace the most advanced revolutionary slogans to make your liberation real and to advance toward it more rapidly. This is why the National Council of the Revolution notes with great joy how intensely you are participating in the big national development projects and encourages you to give greater and greater support to the August revolution, which is above all your revolution.

By participating massively in these projects you are showing yourselves to be even more worthy, given that in its division of tasks, society has always sought to relegate you to the least important tasks. We can see now that your apparent physical weakness is nothing more than the result of norms of appearance and fashion that society has imposed on you because you are female.

As we go forward, our revolution must break from all those feudal conceptions that lead us to ostracize the unmarried woman without realizing that this is merely another form of appropriation, which decrees each woman the property of a man. This is why young mothers are looked down upon as if they were the only ones responsible for their situation, whereas there is always a guilty man involved. This is how childless women can come to be oppressed by antiquated beliefs, when there is a scientific explanation for their infertility, which science can correct.

In addition, society has imposed on women norms of beauty that violate the integrity of their bodies, such as female circumcision, scarring, the filing of teeth, and the piercing of lips and

noses. Practicing these norms is of dubious value. In the case of female circumcision, it can even endanger a woman's ability to have children and affect her emotional life. Other types of bodily mutilation, though less dangerous, like the piercing of ears and tattoos, are no less an expression of women's conditioning, imposed by society if a woman wants to find a husband. Sisters, you make a great effort to win a husband. You pierce your ears and do violence to your body to be acceptable to men. You hurt yourselves so that the man can hurt you even more!

Women, my comrades-in-arms, I am addressing myself to you, you who lead miserable lives in town and village alike. In the countryside, you sag under the weight of the various burdens of dreadful exploitation that is "justified" and "explained away." In the towns, you are supposedly happy, yet deep down you are miserable from one day to the next, laden down with tasks.

In the early morning, the woman turns round and round in front of her wardrobe like a spinning top, wondering what to wear—not so as to be dressed and protect herself against the weather, but in order to please men. Every day she is supposed to—obliged to—please men. You women, when it is time to rest, you have the sad look of one who has no right to rest. You are obliged to ration yourself, be chaste, and diet in order to maintain a figure that men will desire. At night, before going to bed, you cover yourselves with makeup, with those numerous products that you detest so much—we know you do—but that might hide an indiscreet wrinkle, an unfortunate sign of age always considered to have come too soon, age that has started to show, or a premature plumpness. There you are—obliged to go through a two-hour ritual every night to preserve your best attributes, only to be ill-rewarded by an inattentive husband. Then you start all over again at dawn.

Comrades, yesterday in speeches given by the Directorate for Mobilization and Organization of Women, and in accordance with the statutes of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution,<sup>2</sup> the National Secretariat of the CDRs successfully under-

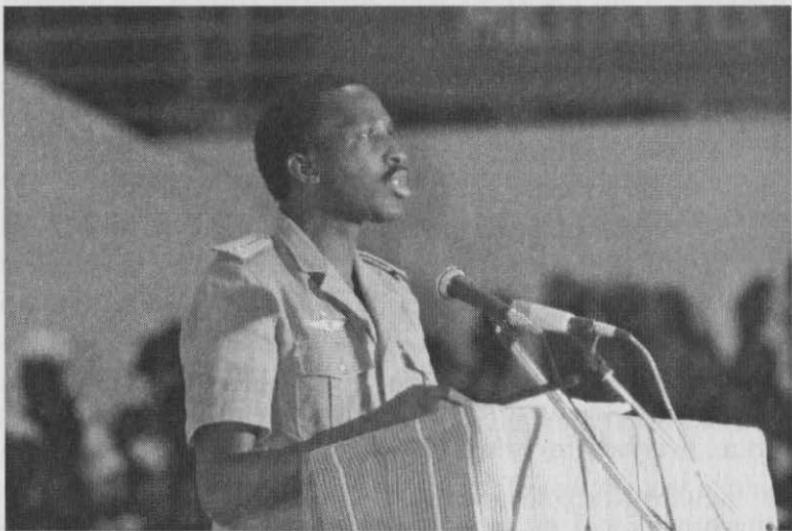
took to set up committees, subcommittees, and sections of the UFB. The Political Commission, which is in charge of organization and planning, will be responsible for completing the organizational pyramid of the UFB by setting up a national bureau of the organization.

We don't need another apparatus led by women to bureaucratically control women's lives, nor to have the occasional underhanded talk among functionaries about women's lives. What we need are women who will fight because they know that without a fight the old order will not be destroyed and no new order can be built. We are not looking to organize the status quo but to definitively destroy and replace it. The National Bureau of the UFB should be made up of convinced and determined cadres who will always be available as long as our great task lies ahead. And the fight begins at home. These cadres should be conscious of the fact that in the eyes of the masses they represent the image of the emancipated, revolutionary woman and should conduct themselves accordingly.

Comrades, sisters and brothers, experience shows us more and more that in changing the classical order of things only the organized people are capable of wielding power democratically. Justice and equality are the basic principles that allow women to show that societies are wrong not to have confidence in them on the political and economic level. The woman, wielding the power she has gained among the people, is in a position to rehabilitate all women condemned by history. In undertaking to profoundly and qualitatively transform our society, the changes wrought by our revolution must include the aspirations of the Burkinabè woman.

Comrades, the future demands that women be freed, and the future, everywhere, brings revolutions. If we lose the fight to liberate women we will have lost all right to hope for a positive transformation of our society into something superior. Our revolution will then have no meaning. It is to wage this noble struggle that all of us, men and women, are summoned.

Let our women move up to the front ranks! Our final victory depends essentially on their capacities, their wisdom in struggle, their determination to win. Let each woman be able to train a man to reach the height of his fullness. To be able to do so, let each woman draw from her immense well of affection and love, let her find the strength and the know-how to encourage us when we are advancing and to replenish our energy when we flag. Let each woman advise a man and be a mother to all men, you who brought us into the world, who educated and made men of us. Let each woman continue to play the role of mother and guide, you who have guided us to where we are today. Let the woman remember what she is capable of, that she is the center of the earth; let each one remember that she lives in the world, for the world; let her remember that the first to cry for a man is a woman. Likewise it is said, and you will remember this comrades, that at the moment of death each man calls out with his last breath the name of a woman—the name of his mother, his sister, or his companion.



ERNEST HARSCH/MILITANT

**Sankara delivering his March 8, 1987, speech commemorating International Women's Day.**

Women need men in order to win, just as men need women's victories in order to win. At the side of every man, comrades, there is always a woman. This woman's hand that rocks the man's child will rock the entire world. Our mothers give us life. Our wives give birth to our children, feed them at their breasts, raise them, and make them into responsible beings. Women assure the continuity of our people, the coming into being of humanity; women ensure that our life's work will go forward; women sustain the pride of every man.

Mothers, sisters, companions, there can be no proud man without a woman at his side. Every proud and strong man draws his energy from a woman. The endless source of virility is the power of the female. The key to victory always lies in the hands of a woman. It is by the side of a woman, sister, or companion that our honor and dignity will flood back to us.

We all return to a woman to find consolation and the courage and inspiration to set out anew for the battle, to receive the advice that will temper our recklessness or some presumptuous irresponsibility. It is always at the side of a woman that we become men again, and every man is a child for every woman.

He who does not love women, who does not respect women, who does not honor women, despised his own mother. Thus, he who despises women destroys the very place from which he is born. He kills himself because he believes he has no right to exist, having come from the generous womb of a woman. Comrades, woe to he who despises women! Woe to all men, here and elsewhere, to all men of all social ranks, wherever they may come from, who despise women, who do not understand, or who forget what the woman represents: "You have touched the women, you have struck a rock. You have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed."<sup>3</sup>

Comrades, no revolution, beginning with our own, can triumph without first liberating women. Our struggle, our revolution will be incomplete as long as we understand liberation to mean essentially that of men. After the liberation of the prole-

tariat, the liberation of women still remains to be won.

Comrades, every woman is the mother of a man. I would not presume, as a man and a son, to give advice to a woman or to indicate which road she should take. This would be like giving advice to one's mother. But I know, too, that out of indulgence and affection, a mother listens to her son, despite his whims, his dreams, and his vanity. And this is what consoles me and makes it possible for me to address you here. This is why, comrades, we need you in order to achieve the genuine liberation of all of us. I know that you will always find the strength and the time to help us save our society.

Comrades, there is no true social revolution without the liberation of women. May my eyes never see and my feet never take me to a society where half the people are held in silence. I hear the roar of women's silence. I sense the rumble of their storm and feel the fury of their revolt. I await and hope for the fertile eruption of the revolution through which they will transmit the power and the rigorous justice issued from their oppressed wombs.

Comrades, forward to conquer the future.

The future is revolutionary.

The future belongs to those who fight.

Homeland or death, we will triumph!

## **Women's role in the democratic and popular revolution**

OCTOBER 2, 1983

The weight of the centuries-old traditions of our society has relegated women to the rank of beasts of burden. Women suffer doubly from all the scourges of neocolonial society. First, they experience the same suffering as men. Second, they are subjected to additional suffering by men.

Our revolution is in the interests of all the oppressed and all those who are exploited in today's society. It is therefore in the interests of women, since the basis of their domination by men lies in the way society's system of political and economic life is organized. By changing the social order that oppresses women, the revolution creates the conditions for their genuine emancipation.

The women and men of our society are all victims of imperialist oppression and domination. That is why they wage the same struggle. The revolution and women's liberation go together. We do not talk of women's emancipation as an act of charity or

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This excerpt is from the Political Orientation Speech, given by Sankara on behalf of the National Council of the Revolution.

because of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the triumph of the revolution. Women hold up the other half of the sky.

Forging a new mentality on the part of Voltaic women that allows them to take responsibility for the country's destiny alongside men is one of the primary tasks of the revolution. At the same time, it is necessary to transform men's attitudes toward women.

Up until now, women have been excluded from the realm of decision making. The revolution, by entrusting responsibilities to women, is creating the conditions for turning loose their fighting initiative. As part of its revolutionary policy, the CNR [National Council of the Revolution] will work to mobilize, organize, and unite all the active forces of the nation, and women will not lag behind. Women will be an integral part of all the battles we will have to wage against the various shackles of neo-colonial society and for the construction of a new society. They will take part in all levels of the organization of the life of the nation as a whole, from conceiving projects to making decisions and implementing them. The final goal of this great undertaking is to build a free and prosperous society in which women will be equal to men in all domains.

However, we need a correct understanding of the question of women's emancipation. It does not signify a mechanical equality between men and women. It does not mean acquiring habits similar to those of men, such as drinking, smoking, and wearing trousers. Nor will acquiring diplomas make women equal to men or more emancipated. A diploma is not a passport to emancipation.

The genuine emancipation of women is that which entrusts responsibilities to them and involves them in productive activity and in the different struggles the people face. Women's genuine emancipation is one that exacts men's respect and consideration. Emancipation, like freedom, is not granted but conquered. It is for women themselves to put forward their demands and mobilize to win them.

For that, the democratic and popular revolution will create the necessary conditions to allow Voltaic women to realize themselves fully and completely. After all, would it be possible to eliminate the system of exploitation while maintaining the exploitation of women, who make up more than half our society?

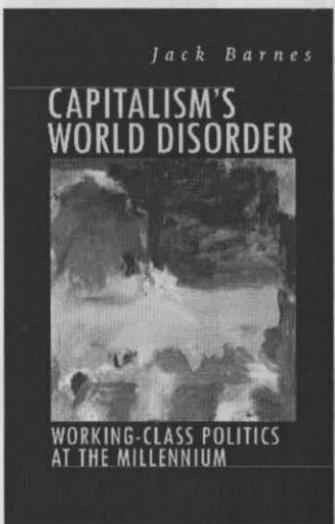
## **Notes**

1. Female circumcision, or clitoridectomy, is a tribal custom entailing the removal of the clitoris of young girls, especially before puberty. It causes many serious injuries and sometimes death. Declared illegal before the revolution, it is still practiced in some of the most isolated rural areas.

2. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) was a mass organization that developed immediately following the August 4, 1983, revolution. It was organized in neighborhoods, towns, villages, workplaces, schools, and army units throughout the country and abroad to mobilize support for various social programs of the revolutionary government and to draw people into political activity. It was dissolved after the revolution's overthrow in October 1987.

3. These words are from a song made famous on August 9, 1956, when twenty thousand South African women, led by the African National Congress, protested against the pass laws of apartheid. August 9 is celebrated today as South African Women's Day.

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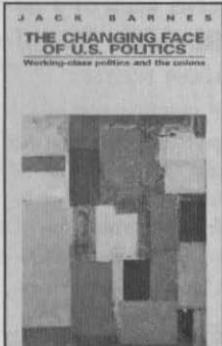
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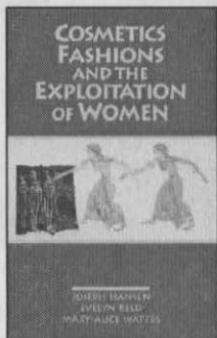
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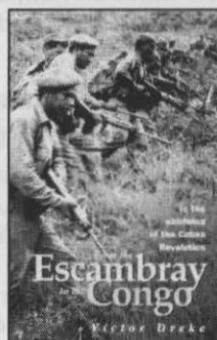


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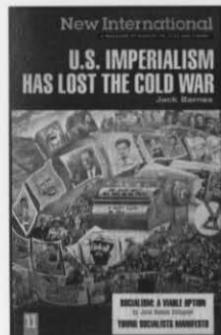
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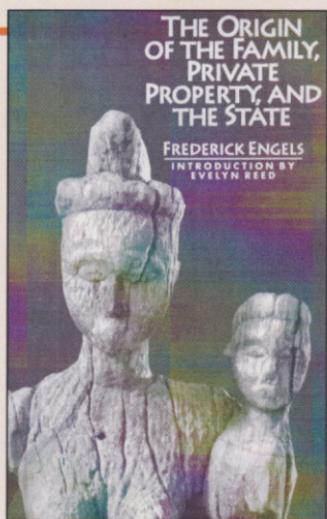
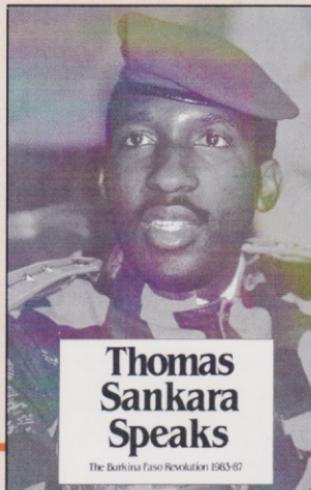
Most of these articles are also available in Spanish in *Nueva Internacional*, and in French in *Nouvelle Internationale*. Some are also available in Swedish in *Ny International*.

**T**HOMAS SANKARA, leader of the West African country of Burkina Faso until his assassination in 1987, said, "There is no true social revolution without the liberation of women. The struggle of the Burkinabè woman is part of a worldwide struggle of all women, and, beyond that, part of the struggle for the rehabilitation of our continent."

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