

Rights of Women

The most profoundly disturbing event to come out of the United Nations' World Conference on Women in Mexico City is not the predictable political conflict between Egypt and Israel, or the calculated rudeness of the walkout of Arab, African and Communist delegates on Mrs. Rabin's address, or even the continuing split between the women of the developed nations and the third world.

It is, in fact, not an event at all—it is the brutal picture that has emerged from papers, speeches and research data of the condition of more than half of the world's female population today. For the majority of women the words poverty, misery and ignorance have a special meaning. While the more privileged women fight for equal opportunities and equal pay in sophisticated economic and social systems, in the poor and undeveloped countries they have no hope even for equal food, medical care or education. The issue is not status but survival.

It is hardly surprising that representatives of these countries feel that economic and social reform is the top priority. Nor is such a priority in conflict with the values of the developed Western world, where the record of achieving social justice is tragically uneven but where the ideal remains one of the goals of society. There is no real division between the women of the world on this issue, and it is sad to see it warped into ideological and political differences that drive them apart.

Obviously the more advanced priorities of the women's movement in this country are not to be downgraded or postponed because of the urgency of basic reforms elsewhere. The woman alone in American society, struggling with the breakdown of social institutions and the need to raise a family on unequal pay and under covert discrimination, has very real problems—considerably more serious than those of the overprivileged few who worry about specialized forms of sexual liberation and exalted executive expectations.

As pointed out in another recent women's parley, it is not liberation that should be the subject as much as rights. This is a universal struggle and there is a long way to go. The right to be a whole human being is as much a woman's as a man's.