IUPUI Hosts African Women’s Conference

This past October, Obioma Nnaemeka (Women’s Studies and French, IUPUI), convened a five-day long conference entitled “Second International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Health and Human Rights.”

The meetings, organized around the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drew over 400 participants from 35 countries and 47 national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Official delegations from Guinea, Madagascar and Burkina Faso also attended. Countries represented included Mali, Togo, Nigeria, Gambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Morocco, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.

Nnaemeka spent two years preparing for the October conference, soliciting papers from around the world and receiving over 500 proposals. She read through each one, and managed to narrow it down to approximately 200 presenters. One of the keynote speakers was Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian physician, feminist and activist, who was imprisoned by Anwar Sadat due to her organizing efforts on behalf of Egyptian women. Nnaemeka said she used the conference “to pay tribute to [El Saadawi] and her life-long work and contributions to women.”

The Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) conference was meant to promote the causes of women of African descent around the world, with special emphases on health and human rights. Panel topics included widowhood and property rights, armed conflict, African American women and health policies in the United States, immigration, sexuality, female circumcision, HIV, domestic violence and the law, traditional medicine, and reproductive rights.

Hailed as a tremendous success by both participants and news media, the conference had an extremely high proportion of Africa-based participants—approximately 50 percent. Nnaemeka says that “contrary to the tragic and apocalyptic cloud which hangs over conferences on Africa held outside Africa, a celebratory tone pervaded the WAAD conference and refused to dissipate. Stories of perseverance and songs of triumph rent the air as... participants admitted that the problems were there but also insisted that they were doing something about them and have prevailed in doing so.”

Nnaemeka will compile the approximately 200 conference papers into a multi-volume set of proceedings, as she did after the first WAAD conference, held in 1992 in Nsukka, Nigeria. She will then select from among these for publication of an edited volume.

WAAD’s first conference led to the formation of the Association of African Women Scholars (AAWS), of which Nnaemeka is president. AAWS has initiated and promoted collaborative work between researchers, activists, and policy makers in Africa and those outside the continent, and has also lent its voice to campaigns against human rights violations in Africa. (For further information, visit their Web site at http://www.iupui.edu/~aaws.) There are also plans to commence publication of a scholarly journal to be titled “Journal of Women in Africa and the African Diaspora.”

The next WAAD conference will be held in October 2000 in Madagascar. The topic will be “Facing the New Millennium: Gender in Africa and the African Diaspora—Retrospections and Prospects.”

—EAB

Conference participants at a luncheon (from left) Naana Banyiwa Horne (English, IUK), Obioma Nnaemeka, and Sabine Jell-Bahlisen (from Germany).