

Not Just a Matter of Colour

"It's time to forget our differences and celebrate our commonalities," the slick Sydney Olympics ad continues to remind us until after the world's biggest sports and athletics event concluded several weeks ago. To the millions of people who watched the Olympics either live in Sydney or in the privacy of their living rooms in different parts of the globe, this was a message that warmed the heart. Meantime in Australia, the *Sydney Morning Herald* joyfully described the Olympics as "the Dreamtime figure and the young Australian spirit walking hand-in-hand into the future represents the continuation of the story of Australia into an era of reconciliation."

There are two undercurrents that we should keep an eye on when we come across the hype created around the Sydney Olympics or any so-called effort to foster brotherhood and unity.

For one, forgetting our differences means emphasis on assimilation and homogenisation. In countries where the dominant model of democracy is "majoritarian" this means the assimilation of the few into the many. In this Western definition of democracy, those who are more in number also wield more power because each single individual is entitled to one vote. So, in the case of Australia, if there are 15 million White Australians as opposed to 400,000 Aborigines, then automatically the Whites have more power. Most of us know how the Aboriginal population was systematically decimated with the coming of the White settlers in 1788. This majoritarian system is likewise evident in the case of the Philippines where Catholics make up 80 percent of the population. While the Philippine constitution stipulates the separation between Church and State, no one can dismiss the influence that the Catholic clergy wields on government institutions. Evidently, this system creates many social, political and cultural structures and norms

that directly and indirectly discriminate against those who do not belong to the majority group. Needless to say, the human rights of minority groups in a majoritarian system are often obscured or denied, in the process exacerbating ethnic or racial tensions.

What challenge is posed to us by majoritarian democracy, particularly those of us who are engaged in the various social movements? It is this: that instead of forgetting our differences, we should be more aware of these differences so that we may respect, and celebrate our diversity. After all, haven't we always prided ourselves in our ability to share a common vision and work together amidst our diverse backgrounds and contexts?

The second point that may be drawn from the Olympics media hype is the oversimplification of the discourse on racial justice and exclusion to that of colour. Certainly, the definition of racism has grown exponentially since the U.S. civil rights activists in the 1960s described racism to be "as American as apple pie." Factors such as early childhood experiences, familial attitudes, religion, education, media influences, peer and social group standards all come into play in defining the final pattern of attitudes and behaviours that we have towards one another. Hostilities in the Asia and the Pacific region such as the conflict in Kashmir, tensions in Fiji and the division between the two Koreas, tell us that discrimination is more than a Black-and-White question. This last point also asserts that racism is indeed an issue within the Southern women's movement as it is in the North.

We would like to stress here that we are also aware of the elite minority rule in many majoritarian democracies. It is one significant issue that deserves civil society's investigation.

In this issue of *Women in Action*, we have invited friends and partners in different women's networks to share with us their views, opinions and analysis of the relationship among race, ethnicity and gender. One of them is Sunila Abeysekera, a prominent feminist writer and activist in Sri Lanka who discusses quite comprehensively the social, political and cultural basis of xenophobia and mistrust and hatred of the 'other.' Another is May-an Villalba of the Migrant Forum in Asia who takes us back into the historical roots of racism, discrimination and xenophobia in Asia and the Pacific and how these are manifested in the continuing labour migration across the region. We are also featuring an interview that I did with Raijeli Nicole, a women's human-rights activist in Fiji on the current situation in this Pacific island-nation, five months after a coup staged by a group of men who pass themselves off as champions of indigenous rights. With these, and a number of other articles tackling the closely related issues of fundamentalism and ethnic conflicts, we hope to contribute in drawing attention to a problem that, we believe, has not been sufficiently addressed in the women's movement.

We also find it opportune to be coming up with this issue as preparations are being made for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance that will be held in South Africa in September 2001. Clearly, our resistance to racism, fundamentalism and all forms of domination is intertwined with our resistance to patriarchy. Neither should come first or second for it is never a question of hierarchy of struggles. Eliminating one will not eliminate the other.

