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Thomas Sankara was the central leader of the popular, democratic revolution in the West African country of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) from 1983 to 1987.

Born in 1949, Sankara entered military school in 1966, one of the few avenues for young people of his generation to receive a higher education. Continuing his training in Madagascar in the early 1970s, he was strongly influenced by a massive uprising of workers and students that toppled the country’s neocolonial government. It was in Madagascar that he was introduced to Marxism by students who had been part of the May 1968 prerevolutionary upsurge in France.

A lieutenant in Upper Volta’s army, Sankara came to prominence as a military leader during a border conflict with Mali in December 1974 and January 1975. Over the next several years, he linked up with other junior officers and soldiers dissatisfied with the oppressive conditions in the country perpetuated by the imperialist rulers in Paris and elsewhere, with the support of local landlords, businessmen, tribal chieftans, and politicians.

Sankara was jailed briefly in 1982 after resigning a government post to protest the regime’s repressive policies. In the wake of a coup, Sankara was appointed prime minister in January 1983. Sankara’s uncompromising course—calling on the people of Upper Volta and elsewhere in Africa to advance their interests against the propertied exploiters
at home and abroad—led to growing conflict with proimperialist forces in the government. In May 1983 Sankara and some of his supporters were arrested by President Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo.

On August 4, 1983, some 250 soldiers marched from an insurgent military base in Pô to the capital of Ouagadougou. This act sparked a popular uprising, in which the Ouédraogo regime was overthrown. Sankara became president of the new National Council of the Revolution, opening four years of revolutionary activity by peasants, workers, women, and youth described in the pages that follow.

Sankara was assassinated and the revolutionary government was overthrown in a coup by Blaise Compaoré on October 15, 1987.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you here this afternoon, not only to present Pathfinder’s new publication containing Thomas Sankara’s 1987 speech on *Women’s Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle*, but to join in the celebration of Tricontinental’s new book on women in Mozambique.

In October 1983, almost twenty years ago, Thomas Sankara, then leader of Burkina Faso’s popular revolutionary government, in outlining the goals of the new revolutionary power said:

“The women and men of our society are all victims of imperialist oppression and domination. That is why they wage the same battle. The revolution and women’s liberation go together. We do not talk of women’s emancipation as an act of charity or out of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the revolution to triumph.”

In one of the poorest countries of imperialist-ravaged West Africa, with the highest infant mortality rate in the world, where illiteracy among women stood at 99 percent,
Sankara confidently raised the banner of women’s emancipation. He put forward a scientific, materialist explanation of the social and economic roots of women’s oppression within class society. And he pledged the support of the National Council of the Revolution to organize and mobilize women to fight to change their conditions of life, and the conditions of life of all Burkinabè. More than a pledge, this was a course of revolutionary action that over the next four years set an example not only for all of Africa but also far beyond.

Karl Marx, the founder of the modern working-class movement, and one of the most intransigent defenders of the fight for women’s equality the world has known, was among the first to point to the social status of women as a measure of the degree of progress of any society. It is one of the most powerful demonstrations of the uneven and combined development of history that in the mid-1980s, Burkina Faso, one of the most oppressed nations in the world, suddenly took its place within the revolutionary vanguard on a world scale.

This small book is not about the fight for women’s equality in Africa alone, important as that objective is. The perspectives offered by Thomas Sankara belong to those fighting for human dignity everywhere, including in the most industrially developed countries such as the United States, and the most politically advanced such as Cuba.

One confirmation of this is the reception this booklet has received since it was first published in English by Pathfinder Press over a decade ago. Well over 7,000 copies have been sold, in addition to another 6,000 copies of *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, a broad selection of speeches and interviews by Sankara that contains the talk on women’s emancipation as one of its most important pieces. The majority of these have been sold in the United States and
other imperialist countries.

And that is in English alone. Now, with the publication of this speech in French and Spanish as well, its reach—its impact—will be much greater.¹

Young Socialists from many countries who brought this title, as well as other revolutionary literature from Pathfinder, with them to the World Festival of Youth and Students in Algiers in August 2001 were able to register this growing impact in a very immediate way. As word spread among the delegations—from Africa especially—many sought out the literature tables where they could get copies.

Likewise, from Pathfinder’s bookstores and street tables in working-class neighborhoods of cities throughout the imperialist metropolitan centers—where tens of thousands of students and workers from countries across Africa increasingly find themselves obliged by the inhuman consequences of the lawful workings of finance capital to emigrate—we have found that Thomas Sankara, together with titles such as Che Guevara Talks to Young People and the Communist Manifesto, are among the most sought-after books. What better indication of the fresh winds that are blowing among new generations in Africa and elsewhere today?

To end, I would like to say a few words about Pathfinder Press itself, which may be new to some of you here today. We like to say that Pathfinder was born with the October Revolution of 1917, because that is when our forerunners began publishing the speeches and writings by Lenin and others who led the first socialist revolution and remained

¹. Between early 2002 and the end of 2006, some 1,500 of the Spanish edition were sold, 1,150 of the French, and an additional 2,000 of the English.
true to its proletarian internationalist course. For eighty-five years we have had one single objective: to publish and distribute as broadly as possible the books, pamphlets, and magazines necessary to advance the struggle for national liberation and socialism.

Along this road, we strive to allow revolutionary leaders the world over to speak for themselves, in their own name. And these words by Sankara are a fine expression of the line of march we work to advance.

It seems particularly appropriate to be presenting this Spanish edition here in Cuba, where so many hundreds of thousands of compañeros and compañeras have such deep and lasting ties to the struggles of the people of Africa. As Sankara said, Cuba sets an example for Africa and the world “of courage, determination, and the constant involvement of the people.” We would like to express our appreciation to our brothers and sisters of Tricontinental for making this joint presentation possible and look forward to more such opportunities in the future.

Mary-Alice Waters
At the center of this book is a speech by Thomas Sankara to a rally of several thousand women in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, commemorating International Women’s Day on March 8, 1987.

It is a testament to the conquests of one of the most far-reaching revolutions in Africa’s history.

On August 4, 1983, an uprising in the West African nation then known as Upper Volta—a former colony of France, and among the world’s poorest countries—brought to power a popular revolutionary government headed by the thirty-three-year-old Sankara. A year later this country of some seven million people was renamed Burkina Faso, the Land of Upright Men.

Over a span of four years the popular revolutionary government organized the peasants, workers, and young people to carry out deep-going economic and social measures that curtailed the rights and prerogatives of the region’s landed aristocratic and wealthy merchants. They joined with working people the world over to oppose imperialist domination. Mass organizations of peasants, craftsmen, workers, youth, women, and elders were initiated.

With broad popular support, the government abolished tribute payments and compulsory labor services to village chiefs. It nationalized the land to guarantee rural toilers—some 90 percent of the population—access to the fruits
of their labors as productive farmers. The prices peasants received from the government for basic food crops were increased. The government launched tree-planting and irrigation projects to increase productivity and stop the advance of the desert in the Sahel region in the north of the country. It organized massive immunization campaigns, and made basic health care services available to millions. By 1985 infant mortality had fallen from 208 for every 1,000 live births at the beginning of the decade to 145, and the accelerated spread of parasite-induced river blindness had been curbed. In a country where illiteracy was 92 percent—and even higher in the countryside—literacy campaigns in its indigenous languages were initiated. The government funded public works to build roads, schools, and housing. Trusting in the justice of the working class and peasantry, it set up popular revolutionary courts to try former leaders and high officials accused of corruption.

And, as demonstrated by the contents of this book, the revolutionary government, at Sankara’s initiative, took measures to combat the age-old subjugation of women, who were encouraged to organize to fight for their emancipation.

In August 1987, speaking in Burkina Faso on the anniversary of the revolutionary uprising four years earlier, Sankara emphasized that, “The democratic and popular revolution needs a convinced people, not a conquered people—a convinced people, not a submissive people passively enduring their fate.” Growing numbers of workers, peasants, and youth issuing from the ranks of such a people were becoming involved in social and political life in Burkina Faso. But on October 15, 1987, Capt. Blaise Compaoré led a military coup serving the interests of those—at home and abroad—whose property and class domination
were threatened by this deep-going revolutionary mobilization. Sankara and twelve of his aides and bodyguards were assassinated and the revolutionary government destroyed.

A week before his death, at a special commemoration in the capital of Ouagadougou, Sankara had spoken about Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentine-born leader of the Cuban Revolution who died in combat twenty years earlier during an internationalist mission in Bolivia. Sankara, speaking of Che’s legacy, noted that revolutionaries as individuals can be killed but “you cannot kill ideas.” Thomas Sankara has himself become a symbol for millions of workers, peasants, and youth throughout Africa especially, who recognize in the Burkinabè Revolution—and in its continuing political heritage—a source of political ideas and inspiration for the battles for genuine liberation on the continent.

In addition to Sankara’s speech on March 8, 1987, commemorating International Women’s Day, this collection also includes a section from the revolution’s basic programmatic document, Sankara’s Political Orientation Speech, issued shortly after the revolution’s triumph and broadcast over radio and television to people throughout the country. Both items are reprinted from Pathfinder’s collection *Thomas Sankara Speaks*.

From his experience as a revolutionary fighter, and his materialist understanding of history, Sankara explains here the historical roots of women’s oppression and why revolutionists must 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 an enduring 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.

Sankara welded ties of solidarity between Burkina Faso and revolutionary struggles in Central America and the Caribbean. In 1986 he spoke in Managua, Nicaragua, on behalf of all the international guests at a 200,000-strong rally marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

Shortly after Sankara’s murder, Dorotea Wilson, a leader of the 1979 revolutionary overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and a member of Nicaragua’s National Assembly at the time, paid the following tribute to his 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, “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 first edition of this work, prepared as a pamphlet, was published in March 1990. French and Spanish editions were published in 2001. This new paperback edition makes
the work available in larger, more readable type, with a new introduction, preface, and index that will aid those for whom Sankara’s words are and will remain worthy of study.

Michel Prairie
June 2007
The weight of age-old traditions in 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 system through which society’s 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

This excerpt is from the Political Orientation Speech given by Sankara on behalf of the National Council of the Revolution. It became the revolution's basic programmatic document.
wage the same battle. The revolution and women’s liberation go together. We do not talk of women’s emancipation as an act of charity or out of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the revolution to triumph. Women hold up the other half of the sky.

Forging a new mentality among Voltaic women that allows them to take responsibility for the country’s destiny alongside men is one of the essential tasks of the revolution. The same is true of the transformation to be made in men’s attitudes toward women.

Until now, women have been excluded from the realm of decision making. The revolution, by entrusting women with responsibilities, is creating the conditions for unleashing women’s fighting initiative. As part of its revolutionary policy, the CNR will work to mobilize, organize, and unite all the dynamic forces of the nation, and women will not be left behind. They will be involved in all the battles we will have to wage against the various shackles of neocolonial society in order to build a new society. They will be involved at all levels in conceiving projects, making decisions, and implementing them—in organizing the life of the nation as a whole. 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 spheres.

However, we must have a correct understanding of the question of women’s emancipation. It is not a mechanical equality between men and women, acquiring habits recognized as male—drinking, smoking, and wearing pants. That’s not the emancipation of women. Nor will acquiring diplomas make women equal to men or more emancipated. A diploma is not a free pass to emancipation.

The genuine emancipation of women is one that entrusts responsibilities to women, that involves them in productive activity and in the different fights the people face. The
genuine emancipation of women is one that compels men to give their respect and consideration. Emancipation, like freedom, is not granted, it is 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 achieve total and complete fulfillment. For could it be possible to eliminate the system of exploitation while maintaining the exploitation of women, who make up more than half our society?