

Beijing '95

A Global Referendum on the Human Rights of Women

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Les auteures comparent le Forum des ONG avec la Conférence officielle des Nations unies en soulignant les discussions

The global focus on women's human rights was accompanied by an insistence that women's equality cannot be discussed in isolation from the global economic, political, and cultural forces rapidly re-shaping the world.



marquantes sur les droits humains, la violence contre les femmes, l'impact de la restructuration économique sur les femmes, l'identité politique et la santé. En examinant les limites et les gains de la plate-forme visant à l'action, les auteures soutiennent que plus les droits humains seront reconnus plus l'organisation des femmes sera forte.

One of the most striking aspects of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the way in which it focussed world attention on the human rights of women. Women's human rights permeated debates at both the official United Nations inter-governmental Conference and at the parallel non-governmental organizations (NGO) Forum held 80 kilometres away in Huairou: in the speeches given by many heads of delegations, including Hillary Rodham Clinton's adoption of the theme "women's rights are human rights"; in the vehement opposition on the part of some governments to what they called the "creation of new rights" in the Platform for Action; in the many workshops and demonstrations at the NGO Forum and in the efforts of the Chinese security to contain that event.

That global focus on women's human rights was accompanied by an insistence that all issues are women's issues and that women's equality, development, and peace cannot be discussed in isolation from the global economic, political, and cultural forces rapidly re-shaping the world. Thus, as a "post-Cold War" conference, major divisions that had marked earlier women's conferences, such as divisions between northern and southern women over what were women's issues or over Israel and Palestine, were replaced by political differences over issues like the global economy or the role of religion. And these debates crossed geographical and cultural boundaries.

The challenge for women's movements in Beijing was to forge a coherent approach that would both accommodate a range of diverse views and provide enough unity to face down those who sought to utilize the event as a way to counter feminism and the growing influence of women in global debates. The idea that this Conference was about defending and promoting the human rights of women provided just such a cohesive umbrella for many. That women succeeded not only in holding the line on gains from previous world conferences but also in advancing on some issues and in creating new networks and strategies in the process is a testament to the fortitude of women. It is also a sign of hope for the future. That we succeeded in the face of well-financed opposition from major religious forces, indifference, and lack of adequate funding on the part of the UN, a host country uncomfortable with non-governmental organizations, frequent competition among NGOs, and some governments that were either antagonistic or seeking to co-opt women is almost a miracle.

But this miracle did not come out of nowhere. In the ten years between the World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing, the global women's movement has become a force to contend with. At the Nairobi Conference, women from third world countries demonstrated that they were creating vibrant local feminist movements offering new perspectives on many issues which also provided the basis for solid global networks to develop. This networking has forcefully emerged in the cross-cultural alliances formed to influence recent UN world conferences.


In 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, women won acknowledgment of their critical role in sustaining the environment. In Vienna in 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, women gained recognition of women's rights as human rights and of violence against women as a human rights issue. At the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, women confronted abusive population policies and lobbied for a Declaration that recognized the centrality of women's empowerment in population and development policy. At the 1995 World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, women forced governments to acknowledge the devastating impact of economic policies on women and to commit to involving them in efforts to eradicate poverty.

Participation in these international arenas has enabled women from diverse regions to define common agendas and to formulate coordinated strategies for lobbying governments. Corresponding dialogue at the NGO Forums has intersected with lobbying strategies and allowed women to air differences, to elaborate new ideas, and to deepen

links with one another. Women have also strengthened networks through electronic mail, newsletters, telephones, faxes, meetings, and other events—all of which have been used to expand alliances, negotiate differences, mobilize coordinated actions, and confront governments and international institutions.

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they participated in regional preparatory meetings, held numerous NGO events, and formed coalitions to give voice to diverse concerns. At the two UN international preparatory meetings held in New York, caucuses formed on topics ranging from human rights to peace and economic justice as well as around constituencies like lesbians and older women. Many of these caucuses included networks with experience at previous world conferences. They converged in the Linkage Caucus, a sort of caucus of caucuses, which sought to develop agreed upon NGO proposals for the Platform.

The world learned about the strength of women's global connections when the Chinese government moved the NGO Forum out of Beijing and sought to isolate it in Huairou. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's office was flooded with calls, faxes, petitions, and letters from around the world. Women engaged in a global conversation about strategies to ensure an adequate site while simultaneously debating whether to boycott the Forum. The alacrity with which women responded to calls for action and the numbers who entered the debate reflected how seriously women took this event. Understanding the need for global solidarity, women decided to show strength of the movement by attending, in spite of the obstacles posed by the site. Over 38,000 people registered for, and at least 30,000 attended the Forum, making this the largest UN gathering in history.

NGO Forum

Women's determination to do their work was reflected in the dialogue and networking that took place in Huairou despite logistical problems created by rain, the Forum's disorganization, harassment by Chinese and other govern-

ment agents, and the overwhelming size of the event. The story that too often did not make it into the press was how, despite difficult conditions, women succeeded in holding their events, learning from each other, and building their movements.

The Forum included a plethora of some 3,000 events that served to educate, involve, and inspire at many levels. Women's rights as human rights was a palpable presence throughout. Banners and posters demanding recognition of women's human rights were visible at every turn, and the program listed hundreds of workshops related to the topic. Panels encompassed the human rights dimensions of everything from structural adjustment programs to education, health, sexuality, and violence against women. Migrant women highlighted human rights violations by countries of the North; comfort women demanded increased accountability from the Japanese government for World War II human rights abuses; lesbians insisted on recognition of the human right to control one's sexuality; and women from East Timor, Tibet, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia utilized human rights concepts to describe violations of women in conflict situations. Sessions also addressed international legal instruments and UN agencies and mechanisms, examining their utility in advancing women's human rights.

Among the multitude of issues discussed, certain themes resonated across regions. The prevention of violence against women in all its forms was clearly of great urgency as was advancing women's health and reproductive rights. Other priorities included reversing the negative impact of international economic policies, countering the rise of religious and secular conservatism, and giving women a greater voice in policy making.


The global dialogue about violence against women ranged from discussions of private acts of incest and domestic abuse to state violence in conflict situations and military prostitution. Women's determination to end all forms of violence is reflected in the transformation of this issue from Nairobi to Beijing. Ten years ago, governments had only begun to acknowledge domestic violence and rape as social problems in the Forward-Looking Strategies. By the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, women had organized a global campaign and tribunal that politically positioned violence against women in its many forms squarely on the international human rights agenda.

Tribunals, panels, workshops, and demonstrations held at the Forum revealed the enormous burden violence places on women's lives and how different constituencies like immigrants and refugees, or ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, indigenous, lesbian, disabled, or older women experience specific forms of violence. Thus, women have moved from making this issue visible to demanding accountability for it from governments and the UN. As Pierre Sané, Secretary-General of Amnesty International and one of the Judges at the Global Tribunal organized by the Center for Women's Global Leadership in Huairou put it,

What we want for governments is not simply to give their assent to the need to protect and promote women's human rights in yet another piece of paper. If it is to achieve anything, the Beijing Conference must be ... a genuine catalyst for action and the swift delivery of real protection. (Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights)

The pressure that women's organizing in this area has put on governments was evident when it emerged as a priority at all the regional preparatory meetings. In the

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Beijing Platform, the eradication of violence against women was one of the least controversial objectives and governments acknowledged that it was a state responsibility which called for more action. A Worldwide Campaign to End Violence Against Women was launched by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) with several NGOs and a number of governments who made concrete commitments to work on this issue. Many agreed to meet with NGOs when they return home to develop national plans of action against gender-based violence.

The impact of women of the globalization of the world economy was another central concern at the Forum. Women from North America and Western Europe discussed economic restructuring with its cutbacks in social services and health care in ways that echoed the devastation of structural adjustment policies described by women from the Third World. And the new voices of women from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that emerged at this Conference also reported their negative experiences in the transition to market economies. In sharp contrast to Nairobi where this issue was divided more on North-South lines, women from all regions saw international economic and trade policies as placing increasing burdens on them. Still, women from the South tended to understand the economy as connected to other problems like violence against women, while northern women more often approached these as separate issues.

Despite broad consensus among many NGOs and documentation of how economic globalization is harming women, governments were not willing to address this topic substantially. The Beijing Platform does acknowledge the negative impact of structural adjustment and calls for recognition that women's unwaged work constitutes a large percentage of national economies. But no

effort was made to address the causes of these problems and governments remain engaged in practices that perpetuate them.

Another issue that resonated with women from all over the world was the danger posed by the backlash against feminism and the growing power of secular and religious conservatism. Discussion of how to counter these forces politically was interwoven with intense conversation about culture, religion, ethnicity, and nationality in women's lives. While there was resistance to the ideologies of religious fundamentalists and the secular right, passionate debates took place about whether women should organize within religious frameworks or from entirely secular space.

Such questions of identity politics formed a sub-text throughout the Forum. Many wanted to affirm their distinct identities around race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc. and to identify areas where their perspectives or problems were often ignored. Some of the tents based on region and diverse identities became lively arenas serving this purpose. Of particular note was the mobilization of disabled women who faced extraordinarily difficult conditions at the Forum and utilized these to educate women about the issue. Nevertheless, many did not want to be isolated in a group based only on identity and sought to bring identity-based perspectives into other issues. The struggle to recognize differences while also finding areas of commonality was a recurring theme throughout the Forum, as it is in women's movements locally.

Women from regions torn by ethnic or religious warfare discussed their responsibilities in the conflicts and often sought to go beyond nationalistic divisions. For example, feminists from countries of the former Yugoslavia met frequently, ate, sang, and protested together; then they formed a network to continue contact across national divisions even though the war often makes this difficult. The Women in Black vigil at the Forum spoke loudly with its large numbers of diverse women—often from countries at war with each other—gathered together in silence to protest male warfare and domination around the world. Again, the transformation of the movement from Nairobi to Beijing was evident. In Nairobi, conflicts between women often degenerated into screaming matches. In Beijing, many women negotiated painful divisions with respect, even if not agreement, which underscored the urgent need for more women in positions of power if the world is to move toward peace.

Sessions at the Forum dealt with many other topics, such as political participation, health and reproductive rights, literacy and women's studies, media and communications, appropriate technologies, etc. Many of these included human rights questions, such as what conditions are necessary for women to be able to fully exercise their human rights and how to establish government accountability in a time of growing privatization. Overall there was recognition that women must address all aspects of life, not just woman-specific topics as some had

argued in previous UN women's conferences. Indeed many sought transformation of the global debates of our day, building on women's organizing at the Rio, Vienna, Cairo, and Copenhagen Conferences. In part, this requires that women both enter mainstream debates, such as that represented by the government Conference, as well as challenge its premises. Many who attended the governmental Conference, which began midway through the NGO Forum, sought to bring the challenging discussions and the strength of women's presence in Huairou to that arena in Beijing.

and women involved in both health and human rights networking over the past few years who promoted these concepts from the inside. The distance from the NGO Forum in Huairou made it difficult for many women who wanted to lobby during the first week to get to the government Conference. Nevertheless, caucus efforts were strengthened by the high visibility of women's human rights activities at the NGO Forum and especially by activities that brought the spirit of the Forum to Beijing, such as the delivery to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights of over one million signatures to a worldwide petition demanding that the UN act urgently to promote and protect women's human rights.

The combined effect of all these activities was a groundswell of support for making the entire Platform a document about the human rights of women, including women's right to education, food, health, and freedom from violence, as well as to the exercise of citizenship in all its manifestations. Previous UN women's conferences were seen as primarily about women and development or women's rights rather than being about human rights. This expansion of what is generally considered to be "human rights," and its usage to frame a wider set of women's concerns reflects organizing done over the past several years.



NGO Forum on Women 1995 in Huairou.

Photo: Milana Todoroff

The United Nations Inter-governmental Conference

The governmental Conference in Beijing was mandated to produce a consensus Platform for Action that would implement the goals set forth in 1985 in the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and advance the Conference themes of "action for equality, development, and peace." Over 4,000 NGO delegates who were accredited to that Conference lobbied, as many had at the regional and international preparatory meetings, to get our perspectives reflected there. Human rights language permeated both the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action agreed to by all 189 governments present.

The women's human rights caucus was a collaboration of NGOs who lobbied government delegates around human rights throughout the negotiations on the Platform for Action. The caucus grew out of the success of the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and built on both global and regional alliances developed with other caucuses in Cairo and Copenhagen, as well as during the two-year preparatory process for Beijing. In addition, a number of governmental delegations included feminists

In this sense, Beijing saw the mainstreaming of women's human rights. Previously, women had to make the case that our issues are a legitimate part of the international human rights agenda. In Huairou and Beijing, this legitimacy was assumed. The incorporation of human rights language into their work by governments and women's organizations from all regions indicates more than a rhetorical gesture. It signals a shift in analysis that moves beyond single-issue politics and identity-based organizing, and enhances our capacity to build global alliances based on collective political goals and a common agenda. Moreover since human rights has legitimacy amongst many governments, the appeal to human rights agreements and international norms can fortify women's organizing.

Overall, the Platform asserted the universal and holistic nature of the human rights of women. Specific language and commitments that human rights advocates gained in Beijing include the reaffirmation and extension of commitments to promote and protect women's human rights, including the right to be free from violence, the right to sexual and reproductive health free from discrimination or coercion, access to information about sexual and reproductive health care, equal rights to inheritance for women and girls—although not the "right to

equal inheritance,” and the obligation of governments to pursue and punish perpetrators of rape and sexual violence against women and girls in situations of armed conflict as war crimes. Universal government ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and limiting reservations to it were urged, along with consideration of an optional protocol to strengthen its implementation. In this process, commitments to women from previous conferences were maintained, and even expanded in the cases of: protection of human rights activists; the ac-

“indigenous people” rather than the term “peoples”; and weak language about the various form of “family.”

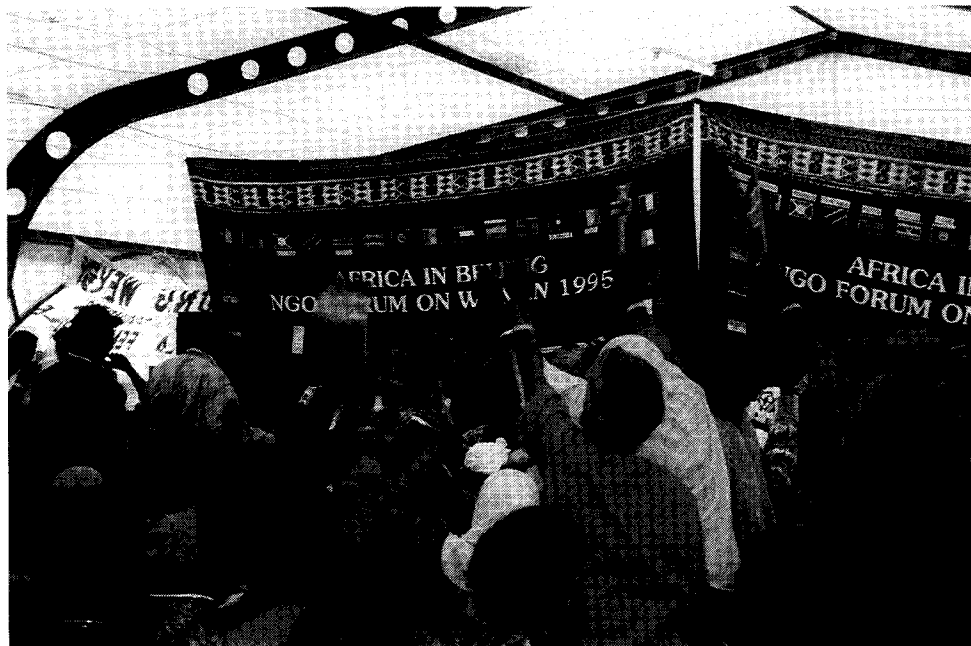
Some major controversies illustrate both what women gained and the limitations of the Platform. For example, in the contested area of sexual rights, many thought it could not be won and the phrase *per se* was rejected. However, these boundaries were expanded in the health section of the Platform which states in Paragraph 97 that

the human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.

Similarly, explicit support for the rights of lesbians and the term “sexual orientation” were excluded from the document in final late night negotiations. Nevertheless, the door was opened with this first open discussion of the issue in the UN, which also exposed the virulence of homophobia among those who manipulate it to oppose women’s human rights generally. At least some governments in each region supported the issue, and a number stated that their interpretation of the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of “other status” in several human rights documents applies to lesbians and gays.

Another major debate centred on the term “universal” and the use of religion and culture to limit women’s human rights. Women sought to maintain the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights’ recognition that women’s human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent. The Vatican, its supporter states, and some Muslim governments attempted unsuccessfully to limit the extent of universal application of women’s human rights. However, they used this debate to claim that there is a feminist imperialism that reflects disrespect for religion and culture, an over-zealous individualism, and an effort to impose western values which destroy the family and local communities. This isn’t a new debate, but more thought must go into how to argue for universality of rights without implying homogenization, especially around religion and culture, aspects of which can also be positive for some women.

Of course, each movement forward for women was met with resistance. For instance, 19 states entered reservations to text that was not in conformity with Islamic law, particularly references to reproductive health and rights, inheritance, sexuality, and abortion. The Holy See put forward their interpretation of much of the Platform, especially the Health and Human Rights sections, as



African tent at the NGO Forum in Huairou, 1995.

Photo: Brenda Cranney

knowledge that systematic rape during armed conflict is a war crime, and in some cases a crime against humanity; the recognition of the right of women to have control over their sexual and reproductive health; that parental rights must be qualified to ensure they respect privacy and access to information by adolescents and children; and the importance of system-wide integration of women’s human rights throughout the UN.

However, clear gaps remain. This is most evident in the lack of strong interaction between development and human rights discourses. As the sub-group on women’s economic rights noted, the human rights section of the Platform reflects largely a concern for women’s individual rights rather than the collective, systemic, or development rights associated with women’s economic concerns, particularly around globalization, economic restructuring, and structural adjustment. Similarly, there is not adequate discussion of the relationship between human rights and peace and militarism. Even within the standard rubric of human rights, there were some disturbing losses: no explicit reference to sexual rights or sexual orientation; the replacement of explicit references to race and ethnicity with “demographic factors” in some sections; the use of

expressing "exaggerated individualism." The extensive reservations on religious and cultural grounds reflect ongoing debates about the human rights of women which could not have been resolved in Beijing but they do lay out the contours of future collaborations and confrontations.

In the critical area of implementation and resources, the promises of the Platform are not backed up with adequate commitments from either governments or the UN. While the Platform includes strong language about gender integration and coordination within the UN, these are rarely assigned to specific agencies or actors, and there is little clarity about which institutional tasks are the responsibility of whom. The idea of making this a conference of commitments was proposed by Australia and promoted by many NGOs, but did not get widespread government acceptance. NGOs nevertheless kept track of commitments referred to in government speeches, and these can form a basis for demanding accountability from our governments.

Throughout the Platform, paragraphs call for re-evaluation of all policies using gender analysis which might ultimately lead to a fundamentally different way of constructing programs, and certainly provides guidance for action. Paragraph 297 notes that states should, as soon as possible, develop strategies to implement the Platform. Member states should be reminded of this as the next stage begins of translating the Platform into concrete strategies and ensuring that its promises are carried forward. How much the Platform for Action advances women's human

rights ultimately depends on how much women are able to use it to further their efforts to influence policy and action at all levels from the local to the global. For now, it provides us with a global affirmation that the rights of women are human rights and that they are in urgent need of world attention.

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Participants waiting for Hillary Rodham Clinton, ngo Forum 1995.

Photo: Angela Miles