

Pages from Beijing

A Woman's Creed and the NGO Declaration

by Linda Christiansen-Ruffman

L'auteure examine le processus par lequel le langage et les questions contenues dans la plate-forme visant à l'action et la déclaration des ONG de Beijing ont été élaborés et comment

The documentation processes for Beijing have been helpful to the global women's movement. They have put and kept women's issues on the political agenda and have provided research and documentation on the status of women.



ceux-ci encouragent le dialogue et la reformulation de cette déclaration.

The Beijing Conference was surrounded by pages of documents, billions (or were there trillions?) of pages of documents. At the Conference itself thousands of the world's media churned out stories for television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. These stories appeared around the globe via media and the internet. Other reporters produced daily newspapers for conference participants—in several languages.

The Platform for Action

The goal of the official Conference was to finalize the pages of the Platform for Action (PFA).¹ Non-governmental organization (NGO) delegates formed caucuses by issue areas, identity categories, and regions which worked to influence the document, as well as each other, and produced pages of suggested "language," position papers, and press releases within NGO caucuses. Official country negotiators worked from myriads of their own country's documents, as well as a plethora of expert reports from the many United Nations agencies, international think tanks, and NGOs. They drafted and redrafted position papers on paragraphs under dispute within successive versions of the Platform for Action. The search for compromise language produced more pages of communication from other members of the negotiating team, other country delegations, accredited NGOs, NGO caucuses, to say nothing of the pages of communication being circulated among country officials "at home," within, and between policy branches of the many relevant government departments. At the conference centre in Beijing, official delegates laboured within

working groups, drafting committees, and other informal groups, day and night, to produce the final pages of text.

On the last day of the official Conference in Beijing, countries reached consensus on the 362-paragraph Platform for Action and the accompanying official Beijing Declaration. The Platform for Action provides the UN's plan for women's "full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power" (Paragraph 13). Agreed to by the governments of the world, it provides policies for government action toward equality. The PFA is useful to groups within countries who wish to hold their governments accountable for implementing policies supportive of women.²

UN processes and the women's movement

The documentation processes for Beijing have been helpful to the global women's movement. They have put and kept women's issues on the political agenda and have provided research and documentation on the status of women. Years before Beijing, research organizations, governments, and groups within the women's movement began their research and policy development related to this Fourth Women's Conference. Governments updated reports from previous UN conferences on women in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985). Governments monitored progress toward equality in their countries, sometimes in consultation with women's groups. Government agencies also suggested future strategies. In Canada, Status of Women Canada released its plan: *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* (August 1995). After Beijing, women in many countries began to document their country's implementation of the promises made in the documents signed at these official women's conferences.

In some countries non-governmental organizations worked for several years in preparation for Beijing. For example, the Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee (CBFC) was formed to share information and coordinate activities and in August 1994 held an issues-identification conference in Winnipeg. In October 1994, Canadian NGOs were both attending the regional preparatory conference in Vienna and organizing at the local level. In January 1995, the CBFC identified "lead groups" to correspond with each major topic in the Platform for Action. Before the New York preparatory meeting in March 1995, these "lead groups" established networks to read the Draft PFA and suggest amendments by adding or deleting "language." After that process, the "lead groups" networks each came up with their own more visionary ideas and

"wish lists" for a feminist agenda for equality, development, and peace. These suggestions were put together in a document to take to Beijing.

After Beijing, the "lead groups" read the Platform for Action and selected five priority areas for Canada in each of the critical areas of concern. The result is the 184-page document: *Take Action for Equality, Development, and Peace: A Canadian Follow-Up Guide to Beijing '95* (Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee). For each of these areas, this document describes what the Platform says, what this means for women, and how women locally can take action to address this issue. Thus, the pages of documents produced by Canadian NGOs around Beijing contributed to strategic and visionary analysis within the local and global women's movement as well as to governmental discussions within the United Nations.

The official Conference adopted a set of mainstreaming "solutions" that aim to fit women into current institutions in equal numbers with men. Most NGOs at Beijing knew that the mainstreaming solution did not go far enough. They also wanted major changes to existing unjust and inequitable institutions. Their more visionary feminist thinking about ways to transform contemporary institutions was accepted into the PFA. But NGOs at Beijing knew the importance and interdependence of both mainstream and transformative strategies. Documents such as the PFA portray the mainstreaming agenda that dominated the official Conference. The alternatives are less visible to those who were not there.

The remainder of this article reproduces two group-produced statements of vision and briefly describes the networking circumstances under which they were created. Their continued use suggests their effectiveness. They are particularly appropriate as globalization processes undermine collective ideals, and as feminist analysis is increasingly critical of the global patriarchal processes of "economic fundamentalism" and "political impotence." The local and global women's movement is beginning to identify these structural features as key impediments to realizing a socially and economically just, equitable, and sustainable future. NGO participants in Beijing reached consensus that fundamental changes are needed if thriving, healthy, ecologically friendly, and sustainable societies are to be achieved. These pages are, in my estimation, some of the most important pages of the Beijing process, even though they are not credited as such by officialdom.

A Woman's Creed

A Woman's Creed grew out of the relationship between Beijing and another United Nations process, the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD). At the three preparatory meetings (PrepComs) for the World Summit, each lasting two weeks, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) helped organize daily Womens' Caucuses. WEDO members, especially Bella Abzug, Susan Davis, and Anita Nayar, created an effective

Caucus strategy that relied heavily on document production and lobbying. Current drafts were reproduced with improvements in the text for women highlighted as added—or deleted—words, phrases, or new clauses. Although at first I feared this approach would limit our analyses, we found that considerable changes could be effected by the addition and deletion of words. Since our goal was to make a difference, we sometimes held back. But in surrounding discussions, our analysis developed and collective imaginations flourished. In addressing economic and social injustices, the Caucus was both visionary and practical. We worked politically to improve the wording of documents both by lobbying governments on specific clauses and by articulating our alternative and critical analysis/vision.

We also worked to build an international feminist movement. Around the boundaries of preparatory meetings, we gathered together to share information and analyses and to build our ideas, understanding, strategies, and praxis. For example, the PrepComs provided occasions when DAWN, a network of feminist researchers in the economic south, held workshops to build its analysis of macrosocial, economic, and political processes from the perspective of the economic south. DAWN had made one of the most important contributions to the Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985 with its book *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. In preparation for Beijing, Peggy Antrobus (coordinator of DAWN) took steps to collaborate with northern partners in order to build a more global critique. At the UN Conference on the Environment in Rio in 1992 she called together representatives from NGOs such as WIDE, CRIAW, ALT-WIDE, and SID to discuss collaborative possibilities in working toward Beijing. For the NGO program associated with the PrepComs, DAWN and its northern partners planned educative programs and seminars to develop a more global feminist analysis. We called ourselves by a series of names and in Beijing we presented panels and workshops as the Women's Global Alliance for Alternative Development. We also talked about linking WSSD with Beijing to bolster the international feminist movement. In order to give concerted attention to strategic thinking, WEDO planned the Women's Global Strategies Meeting. It was November 29 to December 2, 1994, and was attended by 148 women from 50 countries.

Some of us planned the "180 Days, 180 Ways" Campaign to link International Women's Day (March 8) at the WSSD with Beijing and to give visibility to the many activities of women's groups around the globe. Meanwhile others participated in an envisioning exercise that produced A Women's Creed. It was written by Robin Morgan in collaboration with Mahnaz Afkhami, Diane Faulkner, Perdita Huston, Corrine Kumar, Paola Melchiori, Sunetra Puri, and Sima Wali. By the time of Beijing, it had already been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, Persian, Russian, and Spanish by the Sisterhood is Global Institute.²

A Woman's Creed

We are female human beings poised on the edge of the new millennium. We are the majority of our species, yet we have dwelt in the shadows. We are the invisible, the illiterate, the labourers, the refugees, the poor.

And we vow: *No more.*

We are the women who hunger—for rice, home, freedom, each other ourselves.

We are the women who thirst—for clean water and laughter, literacy, love.

We have existed at all times, in every society. We have survived femicide. We have rebelled—and left clues.

We are continuity, weaving future from past, logic with lyric. We are the women who stand in our sense and shout *Yes*.

We are the women who wear broken bones, voices, minds, hearts—but we are the women who dare whisper *No*.

We are the women whose souls no fundamentalist cage can contain.

We are the women who refuse to permit the sowing of death in our gardens, air, rivers, seas.

We are each precious, unique, necessary. We are strengthened and blessed and relieved at not having to all be the same.

We are the daughters of longing. We are the mothers in labor to birth the politics of the twenty-first Century.

We are the women men warned us about.

We are the women who know that *all* issues are ours, who will reclaim our wisdom, reinvent our tomorrow, question and redefine everything, including power.

We have worked now for decades to name the details of our need, rage, hope, vision. We have broken our silence, exhausted our patience. We are weary of listing refrains on our suffering to entertain or be simply ignored. We are done with vague words and real waiting; famished for action, dignity, joy. We intend to do more than merely endure and survive.

They have tried to deny us, define us, defuse us, denounce us; to jail, enslave, exile, gas, rape, beat, burn, bury—and bore us. Yet nothing, not even the offer to save their failed system, can grasp us.

For thousands of years, women have had responsibility without power—while men have had power without responsibility. We offer those men who wish being brothers a balance, a future, a hand. But with or without them we will go on.

For we are the Old Ones, the New Breed, the Natives who came first but lasted, indigenous to an utterly different dimension. We are the girl child in Zambia, the grandmother in Burma, the women in El Salvador and Afghanistan, Finland, and Fiji. We are whale-song and rainforest; the depth-wave rising huge to shatter glass power on the shores; the lost and despised who, weeping, stagger into the light.

All this we are. We are intensity, energy, the people speaking—who no longer will wait and who cannot be stopped.

We are poised on the edge of the millennium—ruin behind us, no map before us, the taste of fear sharp on our tongues.

Yet we will leap.

The exercise of imagining is an act of creation.

The act of creation is an exercise of will.

All this is political. And possible.

Bread. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman's voice singing somewhere, melody drifting like smoke for the cookfires. The army disbanded, the harvest abundant. The wound healed, the child wanted, the prisoner freed, the body's integrity, honored, the lover returned. The magical skill that reads marks into meaning. The labour equal, fair, and valued. Delight in the challenge for consensus to solve problems. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting. Secure interiors—of heart, home, land—so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant at last. And everywhere laughter, care, celebration, dancing, contentment. A humble, earthy paradise, in the now.

We will make it real, make it our own, make policy, history, peace, make it available, make mischief, a difference, love the connections, the miracle, ready.

Believe it.

We are the women who will transform the world.

A Woman's Creed has been reprinted with the permission of the Sisterhood is Global Institute.

A Woman's Creed was written by Robin Morgan, in collaboration with Mahnaz Afkhami, Diane Faulkner, Perdita Huston, Corrine Kumar, Paola Melchiori, Sunetra Puri, and Sima Wali at the Women's Global Strategies Meeting sponsored by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). In addition to the original English language version, The Creed has been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, Nepalese, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. For additional copies or to translate the Creed into your language contact: SIGI, 4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 201, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA. Tel: (301) 657-4355. Fax: (301) 657-4381. Email: mafkhami@igc.apc.org

The NGO Beijing Declaration

The Platform for Action sanctioned in Beijing did not express a new analysis or vision such as that contained within A Women's Creed. Although the Platform for Action will be a useful resource to hold governments accountable and although women of the world will be better off if it is implemented, it is not enough. It suggests fitting women into the existing unjust system. A growing body of research and a growing number of women's voices have recognized the negative consequences of the new



Linda Christiansen-Ruffman with members of Research Committee 32 of the International Sociological Association, NGO Forum '95.

global system for women. The women's movement, the UN women's conferences, and other UN conferences have sparked feminist analysis, namely to stimulate (1) an exploration of women's specific experiences, as women, coming as they do from diverse circumstances throughout the world; (2) an exploration of different forms of discrimination and oppression against women; and (3) an exploration of ways to create a transformed world. Women in Beijing wanted to speak out about economic injustice, a topic sadly lacking in the official documents.

As far as I know, no one went to Beijing with plans to write the NGO Beijing Declaration. The seed for this alternative document had formed within the Women's Caucus at WSSD and gained strength from the disjuncture between our analysis and that contained within the Platform for Action. The PFA's mainstreaming strategy helped to exclude most clauses relevant to economic justice and the macro socio-economic context. The few clauses that were under discussion were negotiated away in New York from July 31 to August 4, 1995, in often closed sessions at a little-publicized "Intersessional." Thus when we arrived in Beijing, the official Beijing Declaration was almost the only place where NGOs in the Economic Justice Caucus might insert our analysis into the official documentation.

Immediately before the UN Conference began, NGOs

held a number of meetings both in Beijing and Huairou to discuss what we would like to see in the official Beijing Declaration. To maximize our chances of having an influence, we started with a current Draft Declaration, and then suggested clauses to be added.

With input from a number of NGOs, the Economic Justice Caucus prepared to participate in the official drafting process. But the inter-governmental committee at Beijing which was assigned to write the official Declaration prohibited NGOs from even entering the room. We had to send our suggestions in with delegates and acquire new drafts and progress reports from them. We watched from the outside with dismay as governmental representatives rushed to agree to language in each paragraph without our suggested additions. We heard of celebrations by delegates whose agendas coincided with those of multinational corporations.

The writing of an alternative declaration grew in response to this exclusion and as a collaborative process among NGOs. Despite almost unimaginable obstacles from inadequate infrastructure and unfamiliar computers, languages, and cultures, we produced and modified drafts, collected signatures of support, and produced what we called an Interim Document for the final day in Beijing,

September 15, 1995. We designed the document as an interim tool in order to have some time for reflection and discussion.

Individuals representing NGOs from all around the world signed onto this NGO Beijing Declaration—with incredible speed. While that process was exciting and produced tremendous energy, and while the authoritative representative structure is characteristic of the UN structure, I propose a much more long-term and sustained process of document review and renewal. This idea first arose out of my experience at WSSD where I was willing to sign onto the document with the responsibility of taking it back to my groups for consideration, and amendment, if necessary. If those reading this "document-in-process" wish to offer suggestions, please do so in the following format: paragraph #/suggested rewording/rationale/your name/name of group/occasion for suggestion. The Beijing process and its pages of documentation continue.

Text of the NGO Beijing Declaration

This slightly revised version of the September 15, 1995, NGO Beijing Declaration reflects suggested changes and redrafting that took place in New York during the Habitat II PrepCom in February 1996. Please send any comments or additions to the contact names at the end of the

document. The Declaration is a document that reflects a continuing process of discussion and consultation.

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Beijing Declaration—February 11, 1996: Interim Version

1. A decade after the Nairobi Conference, the Forward-Looking Strategies have not been fully implemented by any government. We live in a world marked by growing poverty, inequality, injustice, unemployment, environmentally destructive economic growth, war, sexism, rac-

and degradation; encourage overconsumption and arms proliferation; deplete our natural resources and forests; pollute our air, water, and soil; contribute to violations of women's civil, economic, cultural, and political rights. The current growth model fails to meet the fundamental material and spiritual needs of the peoples of the world.

5. Women are major contributors to every economy but much of our labour is unrecognized and undervalued. We do two-thirds of the world's work yet earn only 5 per cent of its income, our labour serving as an invisible subsidy to the world's wealth.

6. The globalization of the world's so-called "market economies" is a root cause of the increasing feminization of poverty everywhere. This violates human rights and dignity, the integrity of our eco-systems and the environment, and poses serious threats to our health. The global economy, governed by international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization and transnational corporations, impose structural adjustment programs on countries in the South and economic restructuring in countries in the North in the name of fiscal health. The result is increasing poverty, debt, and unemployment. The resulting reductions in social programs and services in the areas of health, education, and housing harm the very people they purport to assist. The

media, controlled by transnational corporations acts as an instrument of social control, denying women's right to free communication.

7. Supported by the wisdom of our elders, inspired by Indigenous peoples, energized by youth, and sustained by our sisterhood, we call for an end to these conditions and refuse to accept them as inevitable for the future of humanity.

8. WE CALL ON ALL GOVERNMENTS: a) TO reaffirm that women's rights are human rights and to recognize and ensure women's equal rights to a decent standard of living, health, clean water and air, adequate food, clothing, and sanitation, safe and accessible housing, adequate social security and social insurance, education, and legal aid as agreed in the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. b) TO take prompt action on the cancellation of multilateral debt; to enforce the accountability and transparency of international financial institutions; to guarantee that all economic agreements are subject to human rights legislation, recognize international labour standards, and ensure environmental protection. Economic rights are human rights. c) TO end the trans-boundary movement, dumping, and stockpiling of hazardous, toxic, and radioactive wastes. d) TO promote and use science and technology for peaceful purposes and



Linda Christiansen-Ruffman and friends in a tent, NGO Forum '95.

Photo: Angela Miles

ism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination and violence against women. Moreover, the intersections of gender, race, and poverty create multiple burdens of discrimination especially for women of colour.

2. We, NGO women of the world, rich in our diversity, have gathered along with governments in the largest global conference ever to address women's issues and the existing barriers to our achieving equality, development, and peace. We believe that these goals can be realized by ending the oppression of women and girls, by women's full participation in national and international decision-making, and transforming the social, economic, and political structures which underlie and perpetuate poverty, racism, colonialism, inequality, injustice, unemployment, violence, and war.

3. On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, despite the many obligations undertaken by its member states, women's human rights are not yet respected, protected, and promoted as inalienable, indivisible, and universal.

4. Resources are being persistently squandered on the military with no gain in peace and common security. The dominant development model and global market economy generate great material wealth for a few, while impoverishing many; create homelessness and environmental racism

people-centered, sustainable, and ecologically sound development. e) TO encourage, not hinder, the free expression, full participation, and full access for women with disabilities in non-governmental and governmental organizations locally, nationally, and internationally. f) TO recognize and implement initiatives taken by poor and grassroots women, including them as full participants in the planning and distribution of resources. g) NOT TO misinterpret or impose religious beliefs or traditional practices on women in ways that deny their inalienable human rights. Many call for the separation of religion and state. We also call for an end to all laws and customary practices which deny girls and women their equal rights, and deny their equal access to succession and inheritance. h) TO create systems for the protection of the collective innovation of communities, in which women have had a primary role. Governments should abolish current systems of intellectual property rights, which only protect the interests of transnational corporations and which facilitate piracy of women's creativity in all areas, particularly in agriculture, health, culture, textiles, and food processing. Indigenous women must remain in control of their own knowledge and women's innovation across cultures and throughout history should be recognized and protected. i) TO reject militarism in all its forms and create a culture of peace and human rights. They must redirect the 800 billion dollars annual global military spending to peaceful purposes and convert military production to socially useful purposes. Governments must abolish weapons of mass destruction by banning testing, sales, and stockpiling of nuclear, chemical, biological, and all other weapons. The production, trade, and use of all land mines must be banned, and immediately governments must develop programs that will assist disabled victims of land mines, many of whom are women and children. We demand that our governments work together to solve conflicts without using violence, and that they fully include women in peacemaking and conflict resolution initiatives. j) TO end the criminalization of women and children forced into prostitution by poverty and lack of financial alternatives, and to implement full civil rights for all sex workers. k) TO implement their commitments to measure and value women's unwaged work.

9. Dominant development models have been based upon the appropriation of resources from the South by the North and the transfer of ideas, technologies, and methodologies from the North to the South. We must build upon alternative models that currently exist in both South and North, which are based on equality, mutual respect, true participation, and accountability to all women. These models must be economically and socially equitable and environmentally sound. All development projects must take into account their effects on women, including the additional workload imposed on women by unsustainable and inappropriate technology.

10. NGO women of the world call upon all peoples and all governments to radically reconsider and transform

concepts, assumptions, and structures governing social and economic life, and to take action on our recommendations. This process will require the full and equal participation of women of all races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, classes, languages, girls, young women, older women, Indigenous women, grassroots women, rural women, urban women, women with disabilities, immigrant women, migrant women, refugee women, internally and other displaced women, women of different sexual orientation, and all other marginalized women.

11. WE CALL FOR: a) Accountable, transparent, and participatory institutions. They must be created in all spheres of life, especially to control powerful economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization and other international financial institutions as well as transnational corporations. Such bodies should be subject to codes of conduct that ensure economic, social, and environmental sustainability. b) Access for women to political structures and equal political empowerment at all decision-making levels. Women must have free access to diversified and pluralistic information sources and media which are culturally and linguistically appropriate for receiving and communicating information. Governments must support autonomous NGOs and ensure their full participation in planning and implementing all programs and policies. c) Recognition, protection, compensation, financial and other assistance, and full legal status for the millions of women and children, and the victims of nuclear and other environmental catastrophes, many of them widows, orphans, or disabled, who have been forced to become immigrants, migrants, refugees, internally and other displaced persons, or forced into sexual slavery as a result of war, foreign occupation, and political and socio-economic injustices. Every effort should be made to protect civilian populations from the adverse effects of economic sanctions, which impair their economic human rights. d) Universally accessible, high quality, non-discriminatory health care. It should use the great diversity of possibilities available in health systems worldwide rather than the present overdependence on western medicine that overmedicates and pathologizes women's bodies. We require all governments to sponsor and support woman-controlled research for the prevention and cure of HIV/AIDS, to prohibit any form of discrimination of women with HIV/AIDS, and to ensure women's access to information, care, support, and treatment of HIV/AIDS. e) Development and sustained use of affirmative action by both the private and public sectors of society to ensure the equality of women. f) All the media to change the present negative, exploitative, and sexualized images of women and children to positive ones respecting us in all our dignity and diversity. g) A reshaping of education, beginning at the primary levels, to sensitize all children and adults about human rights, gender issues, and non-violent conflict resolution, stressing the need for world peace. h) Full implementation of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education and the prevention of human rights violations

against women. i) New and additional financial, technical, and other resources to successfully implement the plans and commitments from the Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, and Beijing Conferences, and that member states fulfill their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. j) An end to sexual exploitation, the harassment of, and trafficking in women and children, as well as sex tourism.

12. WE DEMAND AN END TO RAPE AND TO ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE. WE REAFFIRM THAT WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS. WE WILL WORK TOWARDS A SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY JUST WORLD.

13. We seek these transformations in the spirit of service to humanity, partners with youth as agents of change, keeping our children, grandchildren, and future generations in our hearts. We are convinced that as women achieve full and equal participation in all the affairs of the planet, peace will be realized, and the well-being of every individual secured.

This document is the result of three days of intensive consultations and participation among the NGOs present in Beijing. We hope that it reflects the essence of NGO thinking worldwide. We hope that groups and individuals will both endorse the current document and send suggestions for revision to: plenty@igc.apc.org; sekaiholland@mango.zw; mporter@plato.ucsf.edu; Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, Sociology Department, Saint Mary's University Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3C3. Tel: (902) 420-5886. Fax: (902) 420-5121. Email: ruffman@husky1.stmarys.ca

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¹The Platform for Action can be obtained from the UN Department of Public Information, S-1005, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, USA. Fax: (212) 963-4556.

²See Stienstra and Roberts for an analysis of how well Canada has lived up to its previous UN obligations.

³The Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI) can be reached at 4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 201, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA. Tel: (301) 657-4355. Fax: (301) 657-4381.

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RHEA HARMSSEN

The Road to Beijing The Pendulum Swing

The world of women is moving.
Like the cream to the surface,
Like a groundswell slowly rising,
Like a mighty river flood,
Soon a torrent to the sea...
First a trickle down the mountain,
Then a rivulet to the stream.
Coming from each hill and byway
Joining at each pass and glimmering
Like a spidery web of lava,
Molten lava shimmering
Down the side of a volcano.

Women the world over
Have been birthing and then giving
Babes into the arms of death.
Sacrificing sons in battle.
Women, victims of rape and beating,
Alcohol and malnutrition.
Eating out subsistence living
The world over just like cattle.

All is born upon the back
Of this illiterate beast of burden,
This ignominious chattel.
Yet the beast is slowly rising
From its knees and from its burden
To tip the scales with its yearning,
Set the pendulum to swinging.

Let the good women now step forward
Bearing ancient tender mercy
As a mark upon their brow.
Not the greedy or the froward,
Lusting, hungry just for power.
But the noble and courageous.
To be swept up in the tide
Of this great momentous hour
When the wave is gently washing
All the sorrow in its motion,
And revealing only hope
And a birth of possibilities.
An expectant dawning healing,
Loving arms and deep devotion
Nurturing, cradling, giving
To the cause of humankind.

Reprinted with permission from Pendulum, Spring 1995 (University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg). Rhea Harmsen writes about issues of gender equality and race relations with the hope of inspiring social change.

BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION:

Consolidate and reaffirm recent gains: The Platform for Action consolidates and reaffirms gains for women agreed to at recent World Conferences and Summits on children, environment, human rights, population, and social development.

Universality of women's human rights: Agreement was reached that the universal nature of women's human rights and fundamental freedoms is beyond question. This means that governments have an obligation to promote and protect all human rights of all women. Canada strongly supported the concept of universality and considers this agreement to be an important accomplishment.

Mainstreaming women's human rights throughout the UN system: This requires all UN bodies and specialized agencies to consider the "gender dimensions" when formulating policies and programs.

Rape as a war crime: A Canadian proposal was accepted. It reaffirms rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity, and introduces rape as an act of genocide, under certain circumstances, as a new element in UN documents.

Violence against women: The Platform for Action reaffirms that violence against women is not a private issue and that states must exercise diligence to make sure violence is not occurring in the home and schools. States cannot invoke customs, traditions, or religion to avoid their obligation to eliminate violence against women. New elements in the Platform include: states' duty to legislate against violence, to prosecute and punish those who commit violence, and to train people such as social workers, medical workers, and those working with refugees so they recognize gender-based violence and react to it in a sensitive manner. It calls on international human rights tribunals to take a gender perspective in their work. It contains strong language renewing the mandate of the special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

Gender guidelines for refugees: Canadian-introduced paragraph was accepted. It recognizes sexual violence and gender-related persecution as grounds for considering women as refugee claimants for the first time in the UN document. There is also agreement on strong language calling on states to support and promote efforts to develop gender-related guidelines. Canada was the first country in the world to do so.

Reproductive rights/right to control fertility: There is agreement on the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, as basic to their own empowerment. Previous language talked about women's "ability" to control their own fertility, not their right to do so. This builds on agreements made at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, in Cairo, which Canada has strongly supported.

The right to be free from coercion in matters related to sexuality: Agreement has been reached that the human rights of women include the right to have control over their sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.

Health: Canadian proposals were accepted concerning the need to ensure that socio-economic factors that impact on women's health are taken into account.

Education: Agreement was reached on a strong section stressing that literacy and education are fundamental to the achievement of equality. Canadian proposals focusing on the importance of training and life-long learning were accepted.

Parental rights and responsibilities: Agreement was reached aimed at balancing the rights, duties, and responsibilities of parents with the rights and evolving capacities of children in matters relating to access to information, privacy, and confidentiality.

Punitive measures regarding abortion: There is agreement that governments should review laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortions (e.g. imprisonment) and to address the health impact of unsafe abortion.

The family: Agreed language recognizes that the family, as the basic unit of society, should be strengthened and that in different cultural, political, and social systems various forms of the family exist. The Platform for Action states that the upbringing of children requires shared responsibility of parents—women and men—and society as a whole. Maternity and motherhood should not restrict the full participation of women in society.

Workers' rights: Agreement was reached on wording introduced by Canada regarding the freedom of association and on the "right to organize." In many countries women are prevented from exercising these rights.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Women's full and equal access to economic resources: Agreement was reached on women's equal access to economic resources including the right to inheritance and ownership of land.



Milana Todoroff and other members of the Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee, China 1995.

Unpaid work: Canada took the lead in securing strong text on unpaid work that advances agreements reached at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen earlier this year. The text calls for measuring and valuing unremunerated work, the majority of which is performed by women. Agreement has also been reached on action to develop an international classification for time-use statistics.

The girl child: An important outcome of Beijing was the attention devoted to measures aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against the girl child, including violence and negative cultural attitudes and practices (e.g., female genital mutilation). In a separate chapter on the girl child, agreements were reached to help prepare girls to participate actively and equally with boys at all levels of social, economic, political, and cultural leadership and to ensure that girls would have equal access to education and training, nutrition, and health care.

Equal inheritance rights for all children: Agreement has been reached on equality of succession and inherit-

ance rights to eliminate obstacles to equality with regard to the girl child.

Gender analysis: The Platform for Action calls for a gender perspective to be reflected in policies and programs to ensure that governments take into consideration the different impact these policies and programs may have on women and men.

Indigenous women: The Platform for Action addresses the need to involve Indigenous women in development, to recognize their right to education, to ensure equal access to health care and to acknowledge traditional health care. It also addresses the need to promote the participation of Indigenous women in decision-making at all levels and to recognize their knowledge of environmental management.

Religion: The Platform for Action recognizes that religion and spirituality play a central role in the lives of many women and men. It calls for

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and it notes that while religion and belief can contribute to women's and men's moral and spiritual needs, any form of extremism can lead to violence and discrimination.

United Nations: All bodies and organizations of the UN system are called upon to implement the Platform for Action, and to integrate a gender perspective into all policies and programs.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is charged with the system-wide coordination of the implementation of the Platform for Action, and the General Assembly and ECOSOC are invited to review and strengthen the mandate of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The Secretary-General of the UN is invited to establish a high-level position in his office to act as the Secretary-General's adviser on gender issues and to help ensure UN-wide implementation of the Platform for Action.

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