

Negotiating Racism UN-Style

Women's International

BY ELIZABETH PHILIPOSE

We can view those commitments as benchmarks to which we hold our governments accountable and from which we push them further.

Cet article nous parle de ces Canadiennes travaillant pour l'égalité, qui ont pu participer au processus de Beijing+5. L'auteure met l'accent sur les avantages évidents de travailler internationalement à l'égalité des femmes et elle évalue Beijing+5 selon ce que les gouvernements ont accepté d'implanter pour favoriser l'égalité des femmes à travers le monde.

From Beijing to Beijing + 5

Five years ago, the United Nations held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in which governments produced a consensus document known as "The Platform for Action" (PFA) to implement women's equality globally. Attended by close to 30,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and several dozen heads of state, the Beijing Conference was one in a series, following on previous international women's conferences (Mexico, 1975; Copenhagen, 1980; Nairobi, 1985). It was hoped that despite the various difficulties experienced during the negotiations, the Beijing Platform for Action could be a strong commitment needed from states to move the international women's equality agenda forward.

Five years later, the United Nations held the five-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, (known as "Beijing+5"), culminating in the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, (UNGASS), entitled "Women 2000: Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century," in New York in June 2000. The meetings were devoted to final negotiations on a document called "Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action," (hereafter referred to as "further actions").¹ Attended by close to 3,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations and a handful of heads of state, the plus-five meetings were much less of an "event" than had been the Beijing conference. Nonetheless, the five-year review was important for many of the same reasons that the Beijing conference was, and perhaps, even more so in an era of global backlash and rising neo-conservatism.

Five years after Beijing and what should have been a period of implementing measures for women's equality nationally and internationally, Beijing+5, like each of the women's conferences before it, was difficult as women were confronted by governmental inaction and non-implementation. A series of NGO Alternative Reports made very clear that no region and no country has moved forward on the PFA agenda.² UNIFEM's biennial report shows the same absence of advancement of the PFA except in four countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland) and only according to three indicators: school enrollments, salaries in the agricultural sector and parliamentary representation.³ While many governments presented themselves as champions of the PFA, during the Beijing+5 negotiations, no government demonstrated their full commitment to achieving an actual "further actions and initiatives" document, preferring instead to cut their losses and maintain the *status quo* on obligations at least five years old and yet to be implemented.

This article discusses the participation of those Canadian equality-seeking women who were able to participate in the Beijing+5 process and highlights some of the worthwhile aspects of working internationally for women's equality movements. It is important to note that not all the equality-seeking women's organizations who were interested in attending the Beijing+5 meetings were able to participate in Beijing+5, largely because Status of Women and the government of Canada provided limited resources to women's NGOs. One way to evaluate Beijing+5 is in terms of what governments have agreed to implement for women's equality globally. We can view those commitments as benchmarks to which we hold our governments accountable and from which we push them further. Another equally important way to evaluate Beijing+5 is to gauge what equality-seeking women themselves gain from their participation, especially in terms of moving towards an increasingly internationalist perspective of women's equality.

UNGASS gains for women's equality

In the process of negotiations, much concern was expressed by both governments and NGOs that the pressure of time and the absence of political will to advance the Beijing Platform for Action would likely yield a weak document and a watering down of the Platform for

Rights at Beijing+5

Action. Contentious and difficult as the negotiations were, however, they did not result in rolling back the PFA. For the most contentious issues, governments resorted to PFA language *verbatim*. As to whether “further actions” advances the PFA, there are some to note.

- For the first time in a consensus statement on violence against women, the document holds the state *and its agents* accountable for perpetrating or condoning violence against women
- For the first time in a consensus statement, the document mentions *honour crimes* and *forced marriages* as violations of women’s rights
- Unlike the PFA, the document names documented *and* undocumented migrants and the high risk they face of sexual and economic exploitation, racism and other forms of abuse
- Unlike the PFA, there is a strong statement about the negative impacts of globalization, the adverse impacts of changes brought on by open trade and financial flows, privatization and lower public and social spending, including deteriorating work conditions for women in the informal economy; and the obligations that international institutions have to support the PFA, including the World Trade Organization;
- The document affirms the principles of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and urges states to consider ratifying all ILO Conventions relevant to women
- States are asked to take steps to recognize *gender-related persecution* and violence in refugee and asylum laws
- Though reproductive and sexual health and rights were contested, the document makes maternal morbidity and mortality a health sector *priority* rather than simply a concern
- Despite attempts to roll back the PFA and reject the principles of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) which hugely advanced reproductive and sexual rights and health protections for women, both ICPD and PFA standards on the health impacts of unsafe abortions were maintained
- States committed themselves to provide national and international support for NGOs who work on

violence against women, including those that address *race and ethnically-based* violence against women and girls; as well as acknowledged the incidence of racism and racially-motivated violence against women and girls

- States agreed to establish social development funds in collaboration with NGOs to alleviate the negative effects of structural adjustment policies and trade liberalization.

Besides these and other important advances on the PFA, PFA standards were maintained. Though little could be considered breakthrough advances for women’s equality, nothing that was gained in Beijing was rolled back.⁴ However, one of the crucial failings of the “further actions” consensus is the paucity of quantitative benchmarks and timebound measurements for implementation of the recommendations. For example, “promote women’s equal access to decision-making positions, with a provisional minimum target of 30 per cent representation of women by 2003 and equal representation by 2005,” incorporates a time-bound measurement unlike the agreed recommendation that dropped all dates and percentages.⁵ No government actively sought targets and time-bound measurements, preferring instead to make vague and open-ended commitments that are difficult to measure and define and which provide little guidance for accelerating the implementation of the PFA. Therefore, one advance that should have been made five years later, to specify more targets for which governments should aim, was not achieved.

Women’s participation and internationalism

Despite the fact that the five-year review did not concretize states’ commitment to implementing the PFA, there are accomplishments from the Beijing+5 process that are of enormous value to women’s organizing internationally. UN language games and the lobbying of governments are necessary elements of working in the UN system, and some gains were made possible because of an

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effective NGO lobby. However, the more significant part of working internationally for women's rights is in the exchange of experience and perspective that occurs in the process of UN meetings. This exchange is crucial in order for equality-seeking women to understand that what happens to women in Canada, for instance, is directly implicated in what happens to women in any other country. Another valuable aspect of working internationally is the opportunity it affords Canadian equality-seeking

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women to work with each other. Under other circumstances, domestic equality-seeking women tend to work in their own regions and on their particular issues. Going to UN meetings as a loosely coordinated delegation allows us to work collectively in a forum that challenges us to stretch our perspectives about the meaning of women's equality. This is a great contribution to the growing internationalism of Canadian equality-seeking women, a contribution that is crucial in the current phase of globalization.

Canadian equality-seeking women actively participated in the Beijing+5 process at both the international and domestic levels. A substantial number of women's organizations had been introduced to the UN system through their Beijing experience, bringing a minimum of five years of international organizing experience to the review process. The value of this prior experience cannot be underestimated as the task of navigating the UN process is a difficult challenge. The UN is neither amenable to women nor is it a women's equality-seeking activist institution. The diplomatic games of state relations demand continual confusion, not because it is a high level of politics beyond the reach of most women's comprehension, but because transparency would defeat states' ability to wield power.

The Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), coordinated the equality-seeking women's delegation to the Beijing+5 process.⁶ FAFIA began as an idea to build upon the work of the Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee (CBFC) with an expanded agenda for implementing the Platform for Action. Participation in the Beijing+5 review process was not conceived of as the central purpose of FAFIA but rather, the Beijing+5 process was viewed as an occasion to increase equality-seeking women's lobbying efforts to implement women's equality in Canada. An element of FAFIA's work is to develop the capacity of Canadian equality-seeking women to strategically intervene at the UN and other international fora. It is in this capacity that FAFIA coordinated Beijing+5 participation.

Because FAFIA is an alliance of over forty organizations with a wide range of women's issues and concerns, the task of representing all internationally is enormous. As a measure towards fair representation, FAFIA held a national consultation with its members in February 2000, in which domestic and international recommendations were developed to inform our lobbying efforts with the Canadian government and the UN. As was the strategy during the 43rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the CSW as PrepCom to the Beijing+5 process (March 1-19), FAFIA positions were derived from the 106 recommendations covering all PFA critical areas of concern generated from the national consultation.⁷ FAFIA recommendations were used to determine which paragraphs in the negotiating document were crucial and which amendments or changes we would endorse. This document was circulated to 24 FAFIA delegates and other Canadian women's equality-seeking NGOs attending the negotiations, Canadian government delegates, international members of various NGO caucuses, as well as to various governments. The recommendations grounded us in positions that were endorsed by a number of equality-seeking women in Canada, which provided us with a strong basis to work together. Nonetheless, we faced continual challenges in maintaining a cohesive set of principles for our international work.

Reaching consensus

One challenge that arose was in determining an appropriate response to some of the dynamics of the negotiations, particularly in terms of understanding the way that racist discourses structure the UN system. Algeria, Libya, China and Pakistan, and often Sudan, Syria and Morocco actively intervened throughout the negotiations, giving the impression that their aim was to stall the process enough to see it fail. The Holy See was also an active interventionist on predictable issues such as family, religion, and sexual and reproductive rights of women. Country interventions varied, but there was a consistency of statement from the listed countries in regard to the levels of responsibility for implementing the PFA. The "further actions" document is divided into levels of responsibility: national, international, national and international, and includes civil society sectors, NGOs, financial institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization), UN agencies, as well as governments. In the negotiations on international and national responsibility, these countries consistently asked that each paragraph be moved to the national level before they would consider the content of the recommendations. This led to frustration on the parts of other governments and frustration on the part of NGOs and working group chairs about the slow pace and seemingly unresolvable positions on the floor. The content of Algeria's interventions, for instance, followed very often by Libya, were generally on paragraph place-

ment, the process of negotiations and grammar, but rarely about the issues on the table for discussion. The discussions among some NGOs and some governments turned to the ways in which 'these religiously-motivated countries were against women's rights'. Amnesty International released a press release naming the countries and the Holy See, calling them an unholy alliance against the advancement of women's rights.⁸

This was the prevailing tone of discussions within the European and North American regional NGO caucus, and one that is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the Holy See (the representative of the Vatican in the UN) is not a country but a representative of an organized religion with observer status that acts, some say illegitimately, with the authority of a state. There has been an ongoing NGO campaign to unseat the Holy See for several years.⁹ It is important to distinguish between UN member states and observer members and not grant to the Holy See the legitimacy that states have in the UN system. Second, the tone fed an Islamophobic and racist discourse and did not account for all the ways in which other, non-Islamic countries are not champions of women's rights. For many, the idea of talking about a few states as "intransigent minorities" is a misrepresentation of the state of women's equality globally which found alliance with some problematic positions, particularly problematic because they were not derived in collaboration with women from those countries being vilified. Some of the women from Pakistan felt that their opinions were dismissed because they were not canvassed as the campaign against the "unholy alliance" gained momentum. The government negotiator from Pakistan said privately that he has little choice but to object to the level of international interference in national matters since international human rights discourse is more often used to vilify his country and other small and less powerful nations and rarely used to hold North American or European governments accountable for their human or woman's rights violations. At one point in the negotiations, the Pakistan delegation made the point that JUSCANZ (the loose voting bloc that includes Canada) and the European Union were reluctant to make concessions to the pressing concerns of privatization, deregulation, development aid and the declining terms of trade and yet, expected major concessions for their pressing concerns, including sexual rights, which had not yet been negotiated at that point.

The assessment of what some governments are against is far more complicated than the suggestion of an anti-woman agenda on the part of a few states. Many countries placed or renewed reservations to the PFA, and in the negotiations, more consistently, the opposition to several recommendations was to a contravention of national sovereignty. For Islamic countries, national sovereignty is inseparable from religious laws. It is neither a woman's nor a human rights violation to be Islamic or to claim national sovereignty. NGOs such as Women Living under Muslim

Laws and some academics struggle to make the distinction between governments who use Islamic laws in order to repress women's rights, and the Islamic religion (see Anouar; Mertus *et al.*). These are important distinctions. Further, other nations claim national sovereignty and the right to determine the direction of the implementation of the PFA and "further actions" in different ways. For instance, the draft political declaration was originally drafted to reflect that states have the "sovereign right" to implement the "further actions," rather than the "sovereign obligation" that was agreed upon finally. The UN Charter and the UN Declaration on Human Rights are based upon respect for national sovereignty. Most of the reservations to the "further actions" document (echoing many of the PFA reservations) speak to the right of states to interpret and implement the recommendations consistent with their national laws.¹⁰ The U.S. reserved on both the PFA and the "further actions" document, stating that "any commitments referred to in the final document ... were not legally binding," as well as disassociating themselves from the recommendation that funds saved from disarmament should be dedicated to women's equality, saying that it is the sole priority of States to govern their national spending.

NGOs need to be careful not to feed and perpetuate racist discourses and in the process, to alienate women in those countries most often called to task for their human rights violations. The right to sovereignty and self-determination is recognized and included within the human rights framework. However, in human rights treaties, conventions and declarations, it is clear that national sovereignty is not an acceptable justification for the violation of human rights. Whether it is in the name of Islam or capitalism or militarism, at stake are the instances in which state sovereignty is used to violate human rights.

The Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) issued a statement, responding to the vilification of some countries in the negotiations. They state:

The position taken by some Northern government delegates and NGOs – that all would be fine if a right-wing "cabal" of countries were less rigid—is not only false, it smacks of racism and exacerbates the North/South divide in the UN. A common tendency is for the US, European Union and other Northern states to smugly point the finger at corrupt Southern governments, calling for better governance and accountability and scolding them for not upholding UN agree-

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ments on social development indicators, human rights and women's human rights. At the same time these Northern nations set the macro-economic policies, through the IMF, World Bank and WTO, that are devastating developing economies, cutting social service and regulatory budgets, and violating women's economic human rights to jobs, housing, healthcare and an adequate standard of living. ... This is a cynical game being played in the name of advancing women's rights, while pushing forward a neo-liberal economic agenda that hurts women of both South and North.¹¹

The purpose of working internationally for women's equality is lost if we are not allied with women of other countries. Besides, the cross-fertilization of cross-regional ideas is of enormous value to all NGOs working for women's equality internationally. Further, perpetuating rather than challenging racism serves the purposes of conservative elements and those governments from which we at home wish to remain independent. Some NGOs were advised by their governments to go to the press and name the "bad" countries as a way to assert public pressure on them to negotiate and, in the process, asking NGOs to suspend criticisms of their own governments. Finally, perpetuating racism is quite contrary to the indivisibility of women's equality that international women's movements aim to promote. We need to develop strategies to engage more directly the international dynamics of this kind of negotiation and the contextual issues that are also negotiated in such fora, including the social, political, economic and historical conditions of the UN that influence the outcomes of the negotiations.

The lesbian caucus drafted an open letter to the UN General Assembly which captures the complexity of the negotiations and offers a valuable position on the indivisibility of women's equality. It states:

Our demand is not just about sex and sexuality, nor is it just about the lives of lesbians. It is about the totality of our lives. It is about recognizing that human rights are universal, interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. It is about recognizing that human rights must not only be protected and respected, but realized. If one woman is denied human rights protections, the human rights of all women are at risk. When the safety of any group of women is not considered worthy of protection, then no woman is truly safe. The attack on the human rights of lesbians is an attack on the sexual autonomy of every woman.

... some States have failed to support the sexual rights of women, and have failed to recognize the human rights of the full diversity of women. Some States have sought to undermine the economic and social rights of women, and in the process have injured the lives of all women, including lesbians.

Some States have used sovereignty as an excuse to deny the rights of their own citizens. Some States have placed economic interest above the interests of the global community.¹²

Domestic women's organizations that work internationally gain enormous insight into women's movements around the world, the dynamics of international politics which impact women domestically, and the contextually-relative nature of their own and others' political positions. Besides gaining insights into how women's rights are understood internationally by governments, the great value of 'going international' is the opportunity offered to be self-reflective about the positions we take and to evaluate them with a broader and more internationalist perspective than we might otherwise have. Although there were conflicted positions among Canadian equality-seeking women, particularly in the analysis of how North-South dynamics, Islamophobia, racism and economic justice issues impact the negotiations, we managed to discuss our viewpoints and still arrive at a consensus position on the indivisibility of women's equality, both North and South. This is not a simple task, given the diversity of an alliance delegation to the UN. Ultimately, the process of arriving at common positions amongst equality-seeking women in Canada through difficult discussions is a part of what brings us closer to building a global agenda for women's equality and is one identifiable gain of the Beijing+5 process.

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¹See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/finaloutcome.pdf>, for the final "Further Actions and Initiatives" document. See General Assembly Press Release 9725, 10 June 2000, for detailed descriptions of the proceedings. See Women Action 2000 NGO media site, at <http://www.iiav.nl/european-womenaction-2000/>. See the first UNIFEM biennial report, *Progress of the World's Women 2000*, at www.unifem.undp.org/ or www.unifem.undp.org/progressww/.

²See *NGO Alternative Global Report to the UN General Assembly Special Session, 5 years after Beijing, June 5-9, 2000*, from the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CONGO). Also see www.fafia.org for Canada.

³See the first UNIFEM biennial report, *Progress of the World's Women 2000*, at www.unifem.undp.org/.

⁴More assessments of Beijing +5 gains and losses can be found at: www.whrnet.org, <http://www.iisd.ca/>, or <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/>.

⁵The agreed paragraph (100a) reads:

Set and encourage the use of explicit short- and long-term bound targets or measurable goals, including where appropriate, quotas, to promote progress towards gender balance, including women's equal access to and full participation on a basis of equality with men in all areas and at all levels of public life, especially in decision- and policy making positions, in political parties and political activities, in all government ministries and at key policy-making institutions, as well as in local development bodies and authorities.

⁶See FAFIA web site: www.fafia.org.

⁷See *Canada's Alternative Report, Part II*, at www.fafia.org, for the list of FAFIA recommendations on women's human rights, economic justice and violence against women.

⁸For comments from Amnesty International, see: <http://news6.thdo.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/americas/newsid%5F779000/779096.stm>. or <http://news6.thdo.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/americas/newsid%5F778000/778464.stm>.

⁹See Catholics for Free Choice "See Change" Campaign, at <http://www.cath4choice.org/search.htm>.

¹⁰See *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, A/CONF.177/20*, 17 October 1995, for a list of reservations to the PFA; and the General Assembly Press Release 9725, 10 June 2000, for a list of reservations to the "further actions" document.

¹¹See Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice statement, "North Shares Responsibility for Slow Progress at Beijing Plus Five," on the Center for Women's Global Leadership website <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/>

¹²See "Lesbian Caucus Addresses Open Letter to the United Nations Beijing +5 Special Session," 8 June 2000, posted on the website of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), at <http://www.iglhrc.org/news/press/>.

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LELIA YOUNG

A Poet Said

In the valley of loneliness
I wander asking why

I have a dream facing the threshold of darkness
I have a dream of a light sunny stream
Where sounds will shape the thread of meaning
and respect will spurt from sight
I have a dream of understanding
to keep clear the shadow of death
and to lay a smile on the gesture of hope
I have a dream deep like the mesmerizing birth
I have a dream said the poet
not to meet the eye of destruction
at the horizon of peace
A dream to carry to the end of time
A dream of responsibility towards the gazing
eye
In the sea of cynicism where greed grows
vulnerable
a torrent falls swiftly breaking the water

Lélia Young's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS...

Lillian Broca has been exhibited internationally since 1971. Her works are in public and private collections all over North America. She lives in Vancouver, B.C.

Rochelle Rubinstein is a Toronto-based painter, printer, fabric and book artist with a special interest in community projects.

Marie-Claude Pratte est diplômée en beaux-arts à l'Université Concordia. Depuis une dizaine d'années, son travail a été présenté dans divers lieux de diffusion.

Renee Valiquette is a student of women's studies and philosophy at Nipissing University in North Bay Ontario where she is currently co-coordinator of the Campus Women's Centre and a proud feminist.

LA DOUZAINE FÉMINISTE

13 REVENDICATIONS EXIGEANT UNE ACTION IMMÉDIATE ADRESSÉES AU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL POUR ÉLIMINER LA PAUVRETÉ ET LA VIOLENCE FAITE AUX FEMMES

1. Rétablir le financement des soins de santé et appliquer les règles interdisant la privatisation de notre système de soins de santé, en commençant par l'Alberta.
2. Augmenter de 1 p.cent la part du budget global attribué au logement social.
3. Établir le fonds national des garderies tel que promis, en commençant par une contribution immédiate de deux milliards de dollars.
4. Augmenter les prestations de la Sécurité de la vieillesse pour permettre aux femmes âgées de vivre convenablement.
5. Utiliser le surplus de la caisse de l'assurance-emploi pour augmenter les prestations, prolonger les périodes de versement et en faciliter l'accès, et améliorer les congés de maternité et parentaux.
6. Appuyer les femmes qui s'organisent pour atteindre l'équité et la démocratie :
 - a) en allouant 50 millions de dollars à des groupes de première ligne, indépendants, féministes et gérés par les femmes, (dont les centres de femmes, les centres d'aide aux victimes d'agression sexuelle et les maisons d'hébergement pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale) dont le mandat est de mettre fin à la violence envers les femmes;
 - b) en reconnaissant et en finançant les trois organisations nationales autonomes de femmes autochtones pour assurer leur pleine participation à toutes les décisions importantes en matière de politiques gouvernementales, et en finançant convenablement les services offerts aux femmes autochtones, dont les maisons d'hébergement, dans toutes les communautés autochtones qu'elles soient éloignées, rurales ou urbaines;
 - c) en finançant une réunion nationale des lesbiennes dans le but d'examiner et de donner priorité aux secteurs nécessitant une réforme des lois et des politiques;
 - d) en attribuant 30 millions de dollars de financement de base aux organismes de femmes qui revendiquent l'égalité, ce qui ne représente que 2 dollars par femme et fillette au Canada—« Notre juste part ».
7. Financer des consultations auprès d'une grande variété de groupes de femmes revendiquant l'égalité, incluant les communautés marginalisées, et ce, avant toute réforme législative concernant la sécurité des femmes et les droits à l'égalité, en commençant par la réforme du Code criminel.
8. Mettre en oeuvre une réforme d'immigration progressive pour : fournir aux travailleuses domestiques le plein statut d'immigrante dès leur arrivée; abolir la « taxe d'entrée » pour toutes et tous les immigrant-e-s; inclure la persécution fondée sur le sexe et l'orientation sexuelle comme motif de revendication du statut de réfugié.
9. Contribuer à l'élimination de la pauvreté dans le monde entier : en appuyant l'abolition de la dette des 53 pays les plus pauvres du monde; en augmentant l'aide publique au développement du Canada à 0,7 p.cent du produit national brut.
10. Adopter des normes nationales qui garantissent le droit à l'aide sociale à toutes les personnes dans le besoin et abolir les programmes de travail obligatoire.
11. Reconnaître l'exclusion persistante des femmes handicapées de la vie économique, politique et sociale, et prendre les premières mesures essentielles visant à financer et assurer aux femmes handicapées le plein accès à toutes les consultations concernant la condition féminine.
12. Établir un régime national de bourses fondé sur les besoins—et non sur le mérite—afin de favoriser l'accès à l'éducation postsecondaire et réduire l'endettement des étudiant-e-s.
13. Adopter une loi proactive sur l'équité salariale.

POUR QUE ÇA CHANGE!