

Women clearing new paths

*Gabriela Delgado Ballesteros**

In Beijing our here and now set out to question and reevaluate the past. In that immense city, where the Far East draws near, our voices became reflection.

The experience was not only delightful but provided lessons in the practice of tolerance and comprehension towards the greatest forms of diversity. We entered the process slowly and respectfully, with the firm conviction that from our being as women we are building an equitable and tolerant world. First the Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) began its work with the conviction "not to take a single step backwards" ...and then the official conference proposed, now more than ever, to free the other half of the world, women, from their corsets and restrictions.

Forum of NGOs in Huairu, China, and Beijing Conference

The governmental conference and

the Forum of NGOs were two very different forms of expression.

The Forum bore witness to the strength of non-governmental organizations and the pressure they exert on governments, as well as their grievances regarding issues which governments ignore or only partly address with regard to women. Among the Forum's most significant results were the documents produced in "caucus" meetings (agreements derived from discussion among the different countries on specific subjects), which

were presented for the consideration of the official government delegations.

The Forum's work methodology consisted of holding more than a hundred workshops, where different subjects affecting women were openly discussed.

For its part, the Governmental Conference was the culmination of a vast amount of preparatory work, carried out all over the world over the course of three years. International women's organizations had mobilized, moreover, to ensure that their demands and interests would be included in the documents approved at the five previous meetings (on childhood, in New York; human rights, in Vienna; the environment, in Rio de Janeiro; population, in Cairo; and social development, in Copenhagen). In Beijing they hoped to move forward in terms of the commitments made previously.



One of the Forums at the Conference.

* Researcher at UNAM's Center for Educational Research and Services, Mexican delegate to the Fourth World Women's Conference, Beijing, 1995.

As expected, there was a high level of complexity involved in achieving consensus, as shown by the fact that the central document, *Platform for Action*, reached the debate stage with 40 percent of its content in brackets.

The problems currently afflicting humanity were considered material for discussion at the Conference. For example, armed conflicts, deterioration of the environment, violation and lack of recognition of human rights, the negative effects of structural adjust-

ment programs and the transition to market economies in some countries, the growth of poverty, as well as such issues as aid for development and the restructuring of the United Nations. Thus, a significant amount of time was devoted to these themes as part of the debates prior to and during the Conference. Differences of culture, religion, ideology and development made it even more difficult than in previous conferences to reach consensus. One possible reason for this is the rise and consolidation, over the past ten years, of a large number of civic organizations that work with women and defend their causes. Another is the return of fundamentalism to the Islamic world and, in incipient fashion, to several Catholic countries. In the latter case the reactivation of Catholicism's most conservative sectors is well-known, particularly in Latin America. In alliance with Muslim



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countries, these sectors sought to reverse some of the advances made in Cairo, or at least prevent further and greater advances.

The twelve areas of discussion and agreement in Beijing were:

- * The persistent, growing burden of poverty affecting women.
- * The disparities, shortfalls and inequality of access in the field of education and training.

- * The disparities, shortfalls and inequality of access in the field of health care and related services.
- * Violence against women.
- * Consequences of armed conflicts for women.
- * Inequality of participation in political and economic structures.
- * Inequality between women and men in the exercise of power and decision-making at all levels.
- * The lack of mechanisms for promoting the betterment of women at all levels.
- * The lack of promotion and protection of human rights for women.
- * The proliferation of stereotypes regarding women, as well as inequality of access and participation in the communications media.
- * Gender-based inequalities in the management of natural resources and environmental protection.
- * The persistence of discrimination against girls and the violation of their rights.

The following parallel activities were carried out:

- * Permanent Assembly, where reports were presented on the condition of women, their particular problems and proposals for development in each of the 181 countries belonging to the United Nations.
- * Establishment of two commissions, each of which dealt with half of the issues to be addressed in the platform of action. Each

country had five representatives to each commission, two with voice in the assembly while the remaining three lobbied and negotiated with the other countries.

* Various contact groups, charged with fully discussing the conceptual aspects of the action platform.

* Conferences coordinated by the various United Nations agencies, such as UNESCO, WHO, INSTRAW, ILO, UNICEF, UNIFEM and ONUDI, with specific agendas corresponding to the interests of each agency. Specialists in the various topics participated in these conferences.

Negotiations on the *Platform for Action* and the *Political Declaration* were organized around two blocs of countries: on the one hand the Group of 77 (G77) plus China, and on the other the European Union. The independent voices of various countries were added to the discussions between the two blocs; these states included the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Malta, Switzerland, Mexico, Japan, Israel and the Vatican.

Each bloc sought to reach its own internal consensus beforehand, an effort which had the best results for the 15 countries of the European Union, given their considerable homogeneity. In contrast, the approximately 130 countries adhering to the bloc of the G77 plus China encountered greater problems in reaching consensus due to their heterogeneity in

terms of religion, culture and development strategies.

The European Union (EU) presented the most liberal and advanced positions regarding gender issues, but were the most conservative (together with Japan and the United States) in terms of financial resources and the most sensitive about criticisms against development strategies adopted over the past fifteen years. Canada, Norway, Australia and New Zealand frequently shared the EU's stance on gender questions.

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Postures were divided within the G77/China bloc: Muslim and conservative Catholic countries joined their voices to hold back any advance on reproductive rights, sexuality, birth control, abortion, sexual orientation and sex education. The Holy See and Malta joined them on this terrain. Several Latin American countries, India, Cuba and the non-Muslim African nations presented more liberal proposals on these questions.

The African and Caribbean countries spoke against structural adjustment programs, charging them with contributing to the impoverishment of their populations, with an unequal impact on women.

For the G77 in general it was important to achieve a commit-

ment by developed countries to increasing the resources they receive for development and for carrying out various of the actions set forth in the *Platform*.

Many of the discussions revolved around words or short phrases that, at bottom, reflected deep-going differences. For example, the developed countries preferred the concept of "sustainable development," while the G77 and China insisted that references to this topic include "sustained economic growth and people-centered

sustainable development." The Holy See came forward with the suggestion that the phrase read "centered on human beings," since the human being would thereby be protected from the moment of conception. Iran proposed that the word "equity" be used each time that "equality" was mentioned, since this would allow it to continue to treat women in accordance with the precepts of its religious laws.

For its part, the United States incorporated short phrases softening the obligatory nature of governments' commitments and emphasized the fact that since what was involved was a (non-binding) commitment between governments, the latter could not oblige

third parties (private enterprise, international agencies, non-governmental organizations) to fulfill these commitments. Thus, it constantly defended individual rights and freedoms.

The European Union systematically sought to include phrases ensuring a commitment to analyzing all public policies and pro-

grams from the standpoint of gender, while avoiding use of the word “family” and mention of women’s traditional roles—a vision permeated with defense of women’s individual rights. Thus, the *Political Declaration* made few advances.

The *Platform of Action’s* most controversial subjects had to do with the definition of concepts

like “gender” and “family,” issues related to health, sexuality, sexual orientation and women’s reproductive rights, as well as actions aimed at promoting equal access for women to inheritance and property.

Several Islamic countries and a small number of Catholic nations expressed reservations about two of the *Platform’s* paragraphs: No. 97, which includes, among sexual rights, women’s freedom to choose regarding sexuality and the equality that should exist between men and women in this regard; and No. 107k, which reproduces paragraph 8.25 of the Cairo *Program of Action*, which expressly stated that abortion is not considered a birth-control method and refers to “considering the revision of laws which include punitive measures against women who have had illegal abortions.” Reservations were also expressed on paragraph 232f, which seeks to ensure that sexual and reproductive rights will be fully recognized and respected.

The struggle over these questions had subsequent consequences, for example in Mexico, where radical right-wing groups and religious fanatics unleashed a campaign against the actions of the official Mexican delegation, distorting information and quoting out of context. This falsification is contrary to the platform’s spirit and to the Conference’s call for creating a peaceful, just, human and equitable world which promotes respect and advancement for women all over the planet. ^v