

THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN - A BACKGROUND NOTE

The United Nations is convening the Fourth World Conference on Women from the 4th to the 15th of September 1995 in Beijing, China. Concurrent to that will be a non governmental event known as the NGO Forum for Women from 31st August to 12th September 1995. The main themes of the World Conference will be Action for Equality, Development and Peace. The major documents to be placed before the World Conference will be :

A World Survey on the Role of Women in Development and the Platform for Action

The first UN inter-governmental conference on women was convened in Mexico City in June/July 1975. The themes of the Conference were **equality, development and peace**. Two documents emerged from the deliberations of 2,000 government delegates. These were :

The Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their contribution to development and peace and

The World Plan of Action for the implementation of the Objectives of International Women's Year

In Mexico City, from June 16th to July 2nd, 6,000 women participated in the **International Women's Year Tribune**, a parallel non-governmental meeting organised by an NGO planning committee. This meeting took as its focal point for deliberation the themes of the inter-governmental meeting - **equality, development and peace**.

By a proclamation of the UN General Assembly, 1975 was designated the **International Women's Year** and 1976-1985 a **Decade for Women**. The proposal to have an **International Women's Year** was first put before the UN General Assembly by a Women's Non Governmental organisation, the Women's International Democratic Federation.

In July 1980, the UN convened the second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen, Denmark to assess progress made since the first World Conference and to outline action to be taken during the second half of the Women's Decade. Three sub themes were added to the existing agenda of Equality, Development and Peace. These were **Education, Employment and Health**.

Concurrent to the convening of the Second World Conference,

8000 women attended a parallel **NGO Forum** in Copenhagen. Again the themes discussed were similar to the inter-governmental meeting. However countless other issues were discussed ranging from female sexual slavery to feminism; wages for housework to women's studies; appropriate technology to alternative media use, etc. The deliberations at the Forum contributed to a growing international women's movement and to the development of new networks worldwide.

In July 1985, the UN convened a final Decade for Women World Conference in Nairobi, Kenya. **Equality, Development and Peace** remained the primary themes with **Education, Employment and Health** the sub-themes. 2,000 government delegates meeting to review and appraise the achievements of the UN Decade for Women adopted the **Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000**.

A parallel NGO meeting was held at the same time called **Forum 85** which brought together an estimated 15,000 women. Over 1,400 workshops were held together with demonstrations, exhibitions, film and video festivals, a peace tent and a crafts bazaar. While **Forum 85** discussed issues on the agenda of the World Conference, it also expanded its discussions to include many other issues of concern such as women, law and development, sexual preference, research issues and women in arts and music. **Forum 85** provided the stimulus for large numbers of new organisations and networks and gave an international platform for feminist perspectives and women's approaches to a variety of issues.

Planning for the Fourth World Conference on Women

The UN Commission on the Status of Women (UN/CSW) functions as the Preparatory Committee for the Fourth World Conference on Women. It reviews preparations undertaken by the Conference Secretariat and makes recommendations and resolutions as part of the preparatory process. Its fundamental task will be to work on the **Platform for Action**, the major document of the 1995 World Conference.

An NGO Planning Committee under the auspices of the Conference of Non Governmental Organisations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

of the UN is responsible for planning the NGO Forum in Beijing and for setting up a framework to enable NGO participation in the Regional Preparatory Process.

The five regions have conducted Regional NGO Forums that have discussed issues of relevance to the respective regions and have made declarations which have been used to lobby and influence the Platform for Action at the regional inter-governmental meetings.

The World Conference will be an inter-governmental meeting comprising states delegates and there will concurrently be a non governmental event known as the **NGO Forum for Women** from 31st August to 12th September 1995. Its venue, originally to be within easy access to the World Conference, has now been shifted by the Chinese government to the county of Huairou 53 Kilometres from Beijing.

The main themes of the World Conference will be **Action for Equality, Development and Peace**. The major documents to be placed before the World Conference will be :

A World Survey on the Role of Women in Development and the Platform for Action

The Conference will focus primarily on negotiating the Platform for Action which has evolved as a synthesis of the documents which resulted from the five regional preparatory meetings in 1994 - in Asia (Bangkok), Africa (Adis Ababa), Latin America (Chile), West Asia (Amman) and Europe (Geneva) - and expert meetings. The Platform itself however is comparatively weak and has completely omitted some of the major areas of concern to women.

The critical areas of concern which have been identified by the Platform are -

.The persistent and growing burden of poverty on women

.Inequality in access to health and education services

.Violence against women

.Effects of armed conflict on women

.Inequality in women's access to economic structures and policies

.Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making

.Insufficient mechanisms to promote the advancement of women

.Lack of awareness of and commitment to women's human rights

.Insufficient use of mass media to promote women's positive contributions to society

.Lack of recognition and support for women's contribution to managing natural resources and safeguarding the environment.

At the conclusion of the final Preparatory Meeting at the UN Commission on the Status of Women this April, 40% of the Platform remained in contention and enclosed in brackets. The sections most in dispute were those relating to health, economics and women's human rights. The section on health, in particular reproductive health and reproductive rights, was strongly opposed by several countries, specially by the Vatican. The final draft substantially erodes gains made at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. Much of the commitments to women's human rights won at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 were also enclosed in brackets. In the same manner many western and 'advanced' governments in the developing world failed to make a real commitments to the alleviation of poverty, establishment of economic rights and the empowerment of women. A series of informal consultations at the beginning of August sought to bring down some of the brackets. The draft is being systematically studied and analysed by various women's groups and special interest caucuses internationally. A concentrated lobbying effort has been launched at both the individual state level and the international level and will continue unabated at the World Conference to ensure that the document coming out of Beijing is not a reversal of gains already made.

NGO Forum for Women

NGO accreditation to the World Conference was also in dispute. A number of NGOs were refused accreditation - The Conference Secretariat had on list 267 NGOs 'not recommended for accreditation' because they did not meet predetermined UN criteria or fell into the categories of 'espousing violence or directly or indirectly linked to terrorist groups.' Nevertheless, over 2000 NGOs have received accreditation to attend the Conference.

The NGO Forum will be an extremely informal 'happening' bringing together over 30,000 women participating in hundreds of activities, both planned and spontaneous, over ten days. Women will create their own spaces in Huairou converting large and small tents, parasol covered meeting places, booths, class rooms, meeting halls, conference centres large and small into a myriad areas of creative activity celebrating their experiences, raising their voices, being seen, being heard, being constructive and shaping their future. Petitions, campaigns, marches, demonstrations, protests, tribunals, testimonies, vigils, theatre, film, song, dance, mime, poetry, art, craft, speech, lobbying, advocacy.... all of this and more will be used through the Beijing/Huairou process.

One of the first creative initiatives for participating in the World Conference and the NGO Forum, conceived over a year and a half ago, was the Peace Train organised by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. It left Helsinki

on the 7th of August and will make stops at St. Petersburg, Kiev, Bucharest, Sofia, Istanbul, Odessa, Alma Ata and Urmuchi, arriving in Beijing on the 29th of August. The train will carry a complement of 200 women from all over the world concerned and active with issues of peace with justice. At each stop activities have been planned with local women's organisations helping to impart the flavour of the world conference to as many people as possible who will not have the privilege to attend. The activities, discussions and workshops so begun will be continued at the Peace tent in Huairou.

A second "women's train" will leave Paris on the 19th of August with stops in Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, Ekaterinenbourg, Omsk, Irkoutsk and finally Beijing on the 29th. En route will be stops for press conferences, concerts, street theatre and receptions. On the ten day journey women will begin the discussions they will take forward in Beijing on women's rights, human rights equality and development. A special focus on this train will be women and the media and the examination of the socio-political construction of women's image in the media together with discussions on how women can develop communications strategies to project a different, realistic and more empowering image of themselves.

A third train, the Beijing Express organised by the UNDP, will carry both government and NGO delegates predominantly from Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Inde-

pendent States. Here the concentration will be on advocacy, lobbying strategies, mobilising public opinion, building alliances, establishing networks, etc.

Many other creative initiatives have been organised regionally and internationally and will be continued in Beijing. Women's Tribunals, petitions, five minute videos on the theme Action for Equality, Development and Peace, an issue quilt, a woven banner constructed from a multitude of fabric woven by women from all over the world representing a global link between women as well as symbolising women's unity in diversity will be brought to Beijing and displayed over the Great Wall in China.

Women have become visible. They are reclaiming their history, celebrating their victories and struggles and paying tribute to the lives and achievements of their predecessors.

At the end of Beijing, states will adopt a Platform for Action - an Agenda for Equality. Women will go beyond Beijing to ensure that the States will implement and enforce their agreements. Beijing will not be an end to a 50 year celebration of the UN, rather the beginning of the entry into the 21st century where women leave behind the past with the demand for self determination, equal participation, access, respect, recognition and liberation. ■

Sigmund Freud in 1919 observed that "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them". He went on:

it would be tempting to pursue this idea and to derive from this "narcissism of minor differences" the hostility which in every human relation we see fighting against feelings of fellowship and overpowering the commandment that all men should love one another.

Note Freud's emphasis on ambivalence, on conflict within identity itself: feelings of difference fighting against feelings of recognition. It is not a sense of absolute separation of identity that leads to conflict with others, but division, or rather the refusal-by conflict itself-to admit a moment of recognition.....

There is a little verse by Chesterton that refers to

the villas and chapels where
I learned with little labour
The way to love my fellowman
And hate my next door neighbour

Generalized conviction that we are all human beings co-exists perfectly well -as we all know-with deep, precise, historical loathing for actual human beings next door. This is a moral puzzle worth thinking about.

Michael Ignatieff, *Nationalism and the Narcissism of Minor Differences* in Queen's Quarterly Spring 1995