

No Going Back on Beijing Platform for Action

Summer Bland, Women's Electoral Lobby.

Townsville International Women's Conference - AUSTRALIA



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"Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights:
...Setting a Global Agenda"

This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.

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This presentation will outline the significance of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the essential role played by Non Government Organisations in advancing the status of women through the United Nations review process. The document, with its twelve critical areas of concern including poverty and violence against women, has provided the impetus for improvements in women's lives around the world. The achievements of the All China Women's Federation, particularly since 1995, will be provided as an example of what can be done when government and Non Government Organizations work together within the framework of the UN process.

An overview of the background, issues and outcomes from the United Nations 5th World Conference on Women, informally known as the Beijing +5, that took place in New York in June 2000 will be provided within the context of the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The role of NGOs in follow up actions, including the World March of Women 2000, and the call for the signing of the implementation of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, will be discussed. The presentation will conclude with strategies to enhance NGO participation in the UN's 6th World Conference on Women, ie the Beijing +10.

- The United Nations 5th World Conference on Women, informally known as the Beijing +5 took place in New York in June 2000
- This followed on from previous UN Conferences on Women held in Beijing (1995), Nairobi (1985), Copenhagen (1980) and Mexico City (1975).
- At the New York conference, the Australian government led a delegation of 14 government and non-government representatives including May Lamont from Soroptimist International and Susan Halliday, the then Sex Discrimination Commissioner.
- In addition, around 50 women from Australia took part, including around 10 from Queensland, as representatives from UN accredited Non Government Organisations (NGOs).
- They represented organisations such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Soroptimist International, the YWCA, Guides Australia, the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women, UNIFEM, the National Council of Women and the Baha'i Office for the Advancement of Women.
- The major focus was discussion by the UN member states, ie 180 countries including Australia, on the achievements and obstacles in implementing the Platform for Action developed at the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.
- This document is one of the most influential, international policy documents regarding women's human rights.

- Follow up UN Conferences such as the Beijing +5 and the proposed Beijing +10 are forums for monitoring progress against the 12 critical areas identified as being of concern to women across the world.
- Issues such as poverty, violence against women, human rights of women, health care, education, employment and the girl child are some of the areas identified.
- The Beijing +5 conference concluded with an 'Outcomes Document' detailing further initiatives required by countries to implement and strengthen the Beijing Platform for Action.
- While the wording of the Outcomes Document was eventually finalised at the Beijing +5, this was done only after months of negotiations with the UN member states.

The text was only agreed upon after tense negotiations. Some countries, along with the Holy See (Vatican), had difficulty in reaching agreement, not surprisingly, on any matters to do with reproductive rights, family matters and sexual orientation. Exhaustive debates took place on the following issues:

- Elimination of violence against women (eg honour killings and marital rape)
- Women's reproductive and sexual rights, sexual orientation and abortion
- Balance between religion, cultural traditions and human rights (eg Female Genital Mutilation)
- Family issues (ie acceptance of multiple roles for women, eg work and family)
- Continued trafficking in women and girls
- The impact of globalisation on women
- Concern about the role of NGOs and their autonomy
- Identification of indicators for monitoring implementation, and
- Ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW

Those countries, including Australia, that had not yet ratified the Optional Protocol were called to do so as a matter of urgency. Women's organizations back in Australia, after the New York conference were extremely disappointed that the Federal Government refused to sign the agreement.

The National Council of Women and many others lobbied the federal government in an unsuccessful effort to convince them to sign.

- In many countries, the UN process has seen some significant results for women eg China. The All China Women's Federation received enormous credibility after the Beijing conference in 1995 and the Chinese government gave them an international class hotel!
- While I don't know what conditions were attached, the profits from the Hotel now provides the Federation with funds to support a range of women's projects such as teaching women to be self sufficient and independent (not just economically but emotionally as well).
- A regular newsletter is published and there is a national women's hotline service.
- The Chinese marriage law has also recently been amended to ensure monetary compensation to women following divorce.
- Even though they may have a long way to go, the Chinese are proud supporters of their participation in the UN processes to advance the status of women.
- The work of women's NGOs has been essential to ensure follow up since the Beijing +5.

- In signing CEDAW in 1980, Australia committed itself to being a society that promotes policies, laws, organizations, structures and attitudes that ensure that women are given the same rights as men.
- Every five years Australia gives a report to the UN that outlines progress against CEDAW. Australia's report, I understand, is currently in the final stages of drafting ready to be sent. It was prepared in consultation with State Governments as well as women's NGOs.
- Eileen Pittaway and Caroline Lambert from the Women's Rights Network Australia (WRANA) are committed activists in this area and they are behind the production of 'alternative reports' on progress, ie from a non government perspective.
- An immediate follow on from the Beijing +5 was the World March for Women, co-ordinated in Australia with much assistance from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
- In October 2000, women from around the world, approx 155 countries (and 4400 women's groups), participated in activities for the World March which culminated with a rally in New York.

Thousands of postcards were presented to the UN Secretary General Koffi Annan demanding that the UN take measures to:

- eliminate poverty and ensure a fair distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor, and women and men; and
- eliminate violence against women and ensure equality between women and men.
- Susan Halliday, the former Sex Discrimination Commissioner outlined the key role of NGOs when she said:
- “that the role of NGOs in international standard setting is increasing in size and value; this is particularly so for countries without independent human rights commissions.
- As part of the Beijing+5 NGOs developed important language for the outcomes document, which members of government delegations were able to use during negotiation.
- At the same time, NGO caucus groups forced debate around difficult issues. These meetings pushed the boundaries, forcing standards to shift to higher levels, often in the face of severe government resistance from several nations.
- This role played by NGOs is vital if the status of women is to continue to increase nationally and internationally”.

Where to next Will there be a Beijing +10 – there are rumours that it may be held in Sydney in 2005. Based on past conferences, activities will most likely include: the UN Special Session to hear progress reports from each of the participating countries, ie those which have ratified CEDAW.

- NGO activities such as monitoring the discussion of the text of the outcomes document and lobbying delegates as well as protests, demonstrations and festivities.
- Only NGOs accredited by the UN can participate in the ‘conference’. It is unlike other conferences where individuals or groups can simply register their interest and anyone wanting to take part needs to prepare well in advance.
- For anyone wishing to take part it is essential to work with an NGO and watch out for information about the processes involved in contributing and participating in the process.
- That ends this quick overview and further information is in the handout including a list of web site addresses.