

news letter

Women of Europe



Editorial

A new step towards equality

The Fourth World Conference on Women was one of the largest gatherings ever organised by the UN: nearly 200 States were present at the official Conference, 3,000 journalists covered the event, some 30,000 persons total attended the Conference and the NGO Forum which was held simultaneously with the Conference. The result is the unanimous adoption, with a number of reservations on the part of approximately 30 countries, of the Beijing Declaration and an Action Platform of 350 paragraphs negotiated over the course of many months at preparational, regional meetings.

The spotlights now turned away from the Conference centres, the hour has come for the assessment and implementation of the measures adopted in Beijing by the signatory countries. We will have the opportunity to analyse the results, the successes and the failures of the Conference in an upcoming issue of the Women of Europe Supplement. But first, we wanted to prolong the atmosphere of the Conference through the observations of a few of the fortunate ones able to participate, members of the EU's official delegation, representatives of NGOs, journalists and women who, on their own initiative, made the journey to take part in the Conference.

The principal conclusions were that women's rights are, first and foremost, human rights, and that these rights do not constitute a sectorial issue, but form an integral part of general policies. The massive presence of NGOs, the professionalism of their action, their concern for the "concrete", their representation of diverse populations, marked the Conference in a new and decisive way.

Finally, the European Union, represented in Beijing by the Spanish Presidency of the Council, by the different Directorates-General of the Commission and by a delegation of 5 women MEPs, appeared united in its positions centred around the universal nature of human rights, on equality for women and men, on "sexual" rights and on equal participation in public and economic life.

Véronique Houdart-Blazy

Head of Section - Information for Women

Contents

Beijing Conference:	
• European Union	p. 1
• NGOs	p. 3
• Observations	p. 4
• Historical context	p. 7
European Parliament	p. 8
Council of Ministers	p. 8
Info	p. 8

Cristina Alberdi Alonso

Spanish Minister for Social Affairs and President of the European Union's delegation to Beijing.

The Beijing Conference constituted a new step towards equality for women the world over and offered a strong boost to the United Nations' commitment to promoting equality between women and men and to global social development. Our joint efforts in the European Union made it possible for us to speak with one voice in Beijing and to defend vigorously those positions most favourable to equality, mainly in the fields of health, human rights and economic, social and political participation. In that way we contributed to the success of the Conference and made it possible to get past the regressive efforts of a group of countries which defended positions based on very conservative religious or cultural conceptions.

Consolidating the agreements reached at previous world Conferences and Summits, the Beijing Conference allowed for the international and definitive acknowledgement of the woman's place and of her active role in society. It was clearly established that total equal opportunities for women and men is not only in women's interest, but that it is a fundamental factor for achieving social development which concerns society on the whole. One of the most important developments: issues regarding women are not dealt with as sectorial matters, but as a part of general policy.

The Declaration and the Action Platform that were approved represent important progress in many respects, but most importantly they guarantee women the recognition and full enjoyment of their rights as

human beings. It has been established for the first time that no religion, culture or tradition can justify discrimination against women nor any attempt on their life or violation of their fundamental rights. It has also been affirmed that such fundamental rights include the woman's right to exercise control over issues regarding her own sexuality, without being a victim of coercion, discrimination or violence.

Other aspects looked at in a new light at the Conference are the issues concerning "girl children" to whom particular attention was paid thanks, in particular, to an appeal to governments to eliminate all forms of discrimination. In addition, an important agreement was reached in Beijing according to which violent acts committed against women in times of war must be considered as war crimes.

The 4th Conference underscores that it is important to guarantee equal participation in decision-making in all fields, thereby acknowledging that such participation plays a fundamental role in the promotion of women. Another important issue is that of the media's responsibility to portray non-stereotype images of women and men and to eliminate models which promote violence. In sum, the adopted documents are new instruments for global development. They have become compulsory reference material so that the different States and the international

community will promote equality between women and men.



Cristina Alberdi Alonso



“Women’s rights are human rights”

Daniela Napoli

Head of Section - Human Rights and
Democratisation, Directorate-General I A,
European Commission

The United Nations World Conference on Women which took place in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995 is the fourth of its kind, but is innovative in a number of ways. It is the first World Conference:

- held in China and with so many participants, notably women’s organizations, after Nairobi, Mexico City and Copenhagen;
- which has widened the debate to include human rights themes in general and sexual and reproductive rights in particular.

When China asked for and obtained the right to host the Conference, neither the Chinese authorities nor the United Nations Secretariat could have anticipated the extraordinary number of participants, the organizational and logistic difficulties made worse by the structures and the security system put in place by the Chinese administration, not to mention the Conference’s impact on the media. Against all expectations, thousands of women from every country of the world made the journey to Beijing on behalf of those who suffer and have suffered, in answer to the call sent out by the women of today’s and tomorrow’s generations. The Beijing Conference was the largest gathering ever witnessed for a United Nations Conference in terms of the number of both participating NGOs and government delegations. It is estimated that more than 30,000 people participated in the NGO Forum and/or the official Conference.

It is the first time, in the framework of this type of Conference, that human rights have been of major importance. This bears witness to the new dimension acquired by women’s issues. The key themes, which in the past were related to the economic and social context, now include human rights, thus implicating the civil and political contexts.

The Action Platform, composed of six chapters (declaration of intent, general framework, subjects of priority importance, strategic objectives, financial and institutional arrangements), sets forth strategic objectives covering 12 essential areas for the improvement of women’s status: poverty, education, training, health, violence against women, armed conflicts, the

economy, women in decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights for women, the media, the environment and a special section dealing with “girl children”. The Action Platform is accompanied by a political Declaration which outlines the commitments undertaken by the participating States.

Among the most important gains of the Conference are:

- the affirmation that women’s rights are first and foremost human rights. This means that the commitments undertaken by the international community and by the Member States of the United Nations become obligations directly tied to women and to the respect for their dignity as human beings;
- the consideration of the texts adopted in Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen, as reference texts;
- the re-affirmation of the principles of universality;
- the adoption of the concept of equality, even by those countries which, based on tradition and culture, spoke of equity.

These new aspects were the subject of long and difficult negotiations which also raised the issue of women as an element of conflict between religion and secularity. On numerous occasions, the stances taken were characterised by ethical tendencies rather than adherence to a religious group, particularly on matters such as:

- the definition of women’s rights with regard to sexuality - “sexual rights include the individual’s right to have control over and decide freely on matters related to her sexuality”, paragraph 97 of the Action Platform;
- the balance between parents’ rights and respect for children’s rights in accordance with the Convention;
- the concept of “empowerment of women” through the consideration of women’s role in domestic politics and development efforts, as well as the participation of women in political and economic responsibilities;
- the fight against violent acts committed against women in armed conflicts and in social and private life.

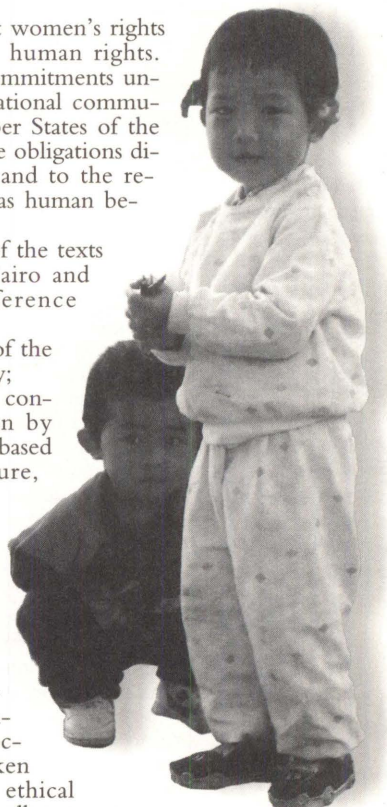
Such developments represent the evolutionary approach which reveals the context in which women’s issues will be regarded in the future.

The Beijing Conference marks an important phase in the women’s emancipation movement, and this at a critical moment in history which is defined by the increasing importance of human

rights in the East and South alike, a social crisis in the North, rising fundamentalism in some muslim countries and a revival of conservatism in other countries. Besides the technical aspects of the Conference, but of equal and significant importance, there was the human dimension - people tired by days and nights of negotiations and driven by the ideas and objectives. The environment animated by the presence of women so different, yet who shared a common commitment, by the curiosity and interest expressed in the glances exchanged, by the daily encounters with men and women, especially youth who spontaneously offered their assistance to members of delegations needing directions. The ambiance was enriched by the contact with a fascinating culture, the unasily accessible

written and spoken language of which only added to the mystique. I was marvelled by the discovery - upon turning a corner - of vestiges from centuries past, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Sky Temple... The streets were coloured by the parades of the African delegations and by the oilskins of the thousands of bicyclists who silently made their way through the rain, as well as by the red, green and yellow colours of the palaces and temples.

The fondest memory I have of Beijing that will forever stand out in my mind is the human dimension. ●



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“Do not let the enthusiasm fade”



NGO lobbying: professionalism

Francesca Bennasar Tous

Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Women's Rights.

The Beijing Conference was an extraordinary gathering and a grand opportunity for women to meet. In spite of the difficulties encountered in preparing the event – the choice of China as host country, the issuing of visas –, the decision to keep the Conference in Beijing was a good one. Already on the arrival of the delegations, the official, but “polite” reception contrasted with the warm greeting of the young women, proving early on that something was underway.



Francesca Bennasar Tous
Photo European Parliament

In Beijing, the European Union carried out negotiations clearly, speaking with a single voice on behalf of the Member States. The European Parliament delegation was able to work alongside the delegations from the Commission and the Council of Ministers. This was vital for making progress in the last rounds of negotiations on the difficult issues, namely human rights for women and “girl children”. The European Union delegation was presided by Cristina Alberdi Alonso, Spanish Minister for Social Affairs, who made a personal investment in the negotiations. Spain is a young democracy. She adopted an enthusiastic approach to the issue of equal opportunities which was felt by everyone in Beijing. The diplomatic efforts of Cristina Alberdi Alonso surely contributed to the more positive attitude of the Vatican in Beijing than at the Cairo Conference.

Coming from the Balearic Islands, a region in Spain where the culture was influenced by the three major monotheistic religions (christian, jewish and islamic), I feel I am in a good position to understand the situation in the Mediterranean countries and that of the women of these regions. The Mediterranean manifests its differences, but not in a separatist manner. Its culture and its heritage (historic past, family and religious traditions, geography, climate, etc.) form an identity deserving of respect.

In Europe, and more particularly in Spain, we are very much aware of the importance of our ties, not only with Eastern Europe, but also with the Mediterranean countries. Europe could represent an important link between the different conceptions of the family which became evident during the discussions in Beijing – those of the North and those of the South. In Beijing I was able to meet women from northern Africa who were conscious, contrary to some groups of Iranian women, of the need for separation of Church and State. They want a society where women and men can live together without one stealing a lead over the other and, in as far as possible, without abandoning religious convictions.

Numerous “follow-up meetings” have already been organised in order to consolidate the achievements of Beijing and to maintain the same enthusiasm. They must provide an opportunity for discussion of how to translate, at a national level, the achievements of Beijing in constitutional terms, with regard to health and education as well as roles in decision-making and in the economy. Political authorities will also need to take into account the concept of “gender” which was at the heart of the debate, i.e. the social ties between women and men. This new notion is a very creative approach for the States in their work towards greater equality between women and men. ●

Barbara Helfferich

Secretary-General of the European Women's Lobby (EWL)

The NGOs demonstrated their mastery of lobbying in Beijing. Daily briefings with the official government delegations and long rounds of negotiations permitted their influence on the Action Platform to be felt.

An efficient lobbying mechanism was set up in order to combine NGO resources. At the heart of the mechanism were the caucuses organised around a specific issue, theme or region. It is there that the NGOs of the world gathered, developed their strategies and tried to create alliances among themselves to obtain backing for their proposals. For example, it was necessary to adopt a common strategy in order to attack the difficult stance of a government.

The *European Women's Lobby (EWL)*, representing some 2,500 women's organizations from the different countries of the European Union, played a key role in two of the caucuses: The *European Women's*



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Caucus which met daily, and that of the UNECE.

The final Action Platform reflects many of the demands put forward by NGOs and acknowledges the important role that they played. The EWL points out that most of the issues on its list of priorities were included, such as the recognition of women's rights as fundamental rights and the economic independence of women.

Like many other NGOs, the EWL will be on its guard: it will strive to ensure that governments seriously work towards the implementation of the text which was so difficult to negotiate. EWL members have always claimed that the post-Beijing phase would be the most important part of the UN Conference on Women. We do not wish to re-live the Nairobi experience of 1985 where the failure to implement the measures adopted at the Conference was felt bitterly. Not following-up on the Bei-



NGO

ing Conference would mean the re-negotiation of results obtained only after much hard work. ●

Women and development

Mieke Van der Veken

Coordinator of the network WIDE (Women in Development Europe).

The progress made in Beijing, in comparison to previous conferences, resides essentially in the dynamics of North/South relations, but also in a greater awareness and the more structured lobbying of the various NGOs. The principal themes of the Conference were related to the promotion of peace and the fight against conflict and violence - both armed and domestic. In the past, the issue of domestic violence was much less apparent among women from the South, and tended to be considered as a problem of rich countries. The fight against this type of violence is a new, uniting factor for European NGOs and NGOs from the South.

Another major theme of the Conference was the fight against the feminisation of poverty both at the local and the macro-economic levels. The way in which poverty was treated in the Declaration, however, was highly insufficient, as the shortcomings of the neo-liberal economic structures were not systematically taken into consideration.

I am rather satisfied with the Conference, because I had feared the worst. Such Conferences organised by the United Nations involve an extremely slow process with results that are not immediately visible. The Declaration, however, is a good working instrument and tool for placing pressure on the various governments. At the closing of the Conference I learned that many of the African organizations had prepared recommendations and were pressuring national governments in order to ensure the implementation of the adopted clauses. Post-Beijing activities are planned and include the organization of awareness campaigns in the North and South alike, in order to inform the largest number of

women as possible on the decisions adopted by the governments. In addition, regional consultation will be organised in some countries in the South to measure the impact of EU policy in terms of humanitarian aid as well as trade relations. ●



Women from near and far

Nadia-Leïla Aïssaoui

Young Algerian veterinary surgeon working at CEDAL (Centre for Studies on Development in Latin America) in Paris

I experienced the NGO Forum in Huairou with all the more intensity as it was the last stop on a Paris-Beijing train journey, with long, lively debates on the future of women and feminism. But beyond such debate there is a common cause: the call for equal rights and a shared concern for violence. And women experience violence acutely as they are always the first to suffer from it. Victims of war, women

also suffer the consequences of a weakening social structure brought on by urbanisation, they bear the burden of traditions so rigid that they are able to resist the pressures of exogenous modernisation. Raped in the streets of New York, beaten by their husbands in Germany, stoned in Iran, they are always considered as responsible for or provoking the act. In sum, women are the incarnation of evil and sin. This is nothing

new, but today such ideas find justification, even legal backing, inspired by fundamentalist doctrines.

During the Forum, the attention focused on this very issue was significant, especially by women living under Muslim law. One of the most notable initiatives is that of "Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité" which proposes an alternative family code. Having said this, compared with the colossal sums allocated by Islamic totalitarian States to their propaganda and the lack of collaboration from Chinese authorities, we are forced to recognise the meager means of the NGOs in countries most in need. ●

"The Conference against

Isabel Stamwasser

Holder of a degree in feminist studies from McGill University (Canada)

If "the world through the eyes of women" was the slogan of the Forum of the 4th World Conference, "scapegoat China through the eyes of the press" is the echo coming from the large assembly of women. It is the first time that such a Conference is analysing the factors which, in all contemporary societies, sanction the attacks made on women's dignity.

Addressing a pack of media hounds lying in wait for a scoop regarding the transport and accommodation arrangements, the Secretary-General of the Conference, Gertrude Mongella, exclaimed: "The women have more important things to debate than where they are sleeping". The reports on such material conditions could have served as introductions to articles on the obstacles encountered daily by women the around the world. The widely diffused photos of nine Tibetans gagged with silk scarves distributed by China to the 37,000 participants could have made for a strong analogy for the Conference's Action Platform in which one out of every three words was put in brackets and called into question by the governments.

Of course it is outrageous that 37,000 "unacknowledged international experts" had to work long hours in tents filled with puddles of water and travel thousands of kilometres to offer their expertise and insight. But is feminism not more than merely a surprising initiative in a cold and muddy context? Everywhere, women struggle to make progress in horrendous sanitary and environmental conditions, fight for freedom of speech, movement and fair representation, they escape from high surveillance and strive to remove their fundamental human rights from "brackets". At the great Beijing assembly one spoke of



Observations

's not about raging China"

passion and change. Why then did this feminist initiative rarely appear in the media?



The momentum of the initiative is superbly illustrated by the symbol of a train of women crossing the planet from Paris to Beijing at high-speed to join in the Conference. The train, organised by NGOs for NGOs symbolises international unity, action and

hope. The trip was 160 women of all ages and from 18 countries together for 11 days, long discussions lasting late into the night, the projection of women's films in the feminist library with, in the background, an orchestra of women. The train of women means that the feminist movement is alive and well, that it knows where it is headed and that it is without frontiers.

Upon arrival in Beijing, 37,000 women from countries the world over rallied together to the chant "women's rights are human rights". Recognising the universal nature of the Beijing Conference means recognising that feminism is both a struggle and a celebration. ●

China is still a long way off

Isotta Gaeta

Coordinator of the European Network of Italian Women Journalists

I experienced the Beijing Conference, with great emotion, as an important and stimulating experience. Not only because I was able to meet hundreds of women from all corners of the world, but especially because I realised the importance and the value of the unity and influence of which Europe is capable. What we have constructed over the past few years is the possibility to make our presence felt as free and democratic citizens, women capable of establishing equal opportunities at an ever higher level.

Accustomed to often meeting women from many different countries, within the walls of the citadel, I nonetheless felt a kind liberating goodwill manifested in the collective meetings, the encounters, the joy of exchanging addresses and photographs. The African women were astonishing, colourful and noisy; the Islamic women dressed in black, following, in groups, the head of their delegation; the "VIPs", confident and strong in their role of authority; the women of the Forum, eager in the elaboration of projects. In the Huairou ghetto there were so many presences rich with expectations and questions, matured by experience, suffering and isolation - themes for common reflection to write, as protagonists, a new charter of laws.

But in the room where the "contact groups" met, the atmosphere, the rhythm, the relations were quite different. There, the confrontation of two worlds was obvious, the objective being to break the barriers

of isolation and inequality by giving women the possibility to decide the sort of their own lives, their own bodies and their own futures. I followed with enthusiasm the commitment and the passion of the representatives of the European countries who argued their cases with a great deal of intelligence, particularly the Spanish lead by their head of delegation, Cristina Alberdi Alonso and by Marina Subiratz. I listened with interest to the analyses and the criticism from the women of NGOs in developing countries. To my surprise, I discovered many journalists from countries such as Mali and Senegal who were firm in their commitments and who demonstrated true professionalism.

The immense press room was a privileged observatory, where a decisive role was played: communicating to the world the messages, the reasons behind the decisions and the final objectives of the Conference. He who communicated best and at the most opportune moment was able to monopolise the most amount of space.

Contact with Chinese reality was very difficult, also because of the many difficulties and restrictions imposed on us by the authorities. Many things that I had hardly begun to ponder and that I thought I had understood revealed a world wrestling with a thousand contradictions and which has not yet learned how to marry democracy, liberty and equality with the needs of material life. China is still a long way off! ●

Beijing, city of contrast

Sonia Zacharatou

Vice-President of the European Network of Greek Women Journalists

Beijing, September 1995, the month in which the rains cease. The best month to visit the Chinese capital. And yet, there I am as a journalist, to cover the work of the 4th World Conference on Women organised by the United Nations. One has the impression that women have invaded the city. Posters welcome them at the airport. Along the boulevards, everywhere there are signs with the slogan "Equality, development, peace", and the streets abound with signs indicating the way to the Conference centre. But it is a

false image of Beijing as we learned that, for the hosting of the Conference, beggars were "removed" from public places, the city was thoroughly cleaned and special measures were taken to control automobile traffic to avoid chaos in the city centre.

But why was Beijing chosen for the Conference site? Specialists say that it was a political game between the United States and China. It is true that the decision pleased the Chinese very much. It is also said that it would allow support to be shown Chinese women who are forced to abort after their first child or if they have the "misfortune" of bearing a girl. Besides the obligatory abortion imposed on Chinese women, one mustn't forget the hundreds of thousands of women who undergo sex-



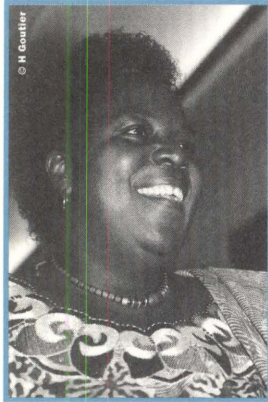
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Cultural diversity

ual mutilation required by tradition, nor those women who are burned alive in India over their dowries. One mustn't forget either that it is not only the women of China, India or muslim countries whose individual rights are ridiculed and who are considered as "different", as if they did not belong to the human race - it is all women, everywhere.

Thousands of women from all corners of the planet formed the patchwork of Beijing. Magnificent women who traveled half way around the globe to discuss their problems, broaden their horizons, exchange views, ask questions, express objections and return to their country proposing an Action Platform to help governments ratify more democratic laws. To see such a mixture of cultures and of people trying to communicate not only through the language of contrasts, but also through the language expressed in the colour of clothing, the traditional riches of each race, the make-up, the tattoos, the silence and the gestures, was a real feast for the eyes. And what is remarkable is that there were native American Indians, Africans, Asians, Europeans of every age, colour and religion, women bearing their children in their arms and handicapped women, all fighting for their rights...

With such a busy programme, the Conference could have lasted twice as long. But one does not get an opportunity to visit Beijing very often and it is difficult for a journalist to stick strictly to her job. Moreover, the vivaciousness of the city draws us in: people and bicycles inter-mix, walk and roll together magnificently, causing no accidents. One sees a multitude of identical, but different people, some of whom bear the scars of social discrimination due to the miserable living conditions of most Chinese. We leave the city saying only: "it is interesting from a socio-political point of view. Beijing is not a pretty town. It is a city of contrast". ●



Gertrude Mongella
Secretary-General of the
Conference

Marie-Thérèse Destercke

Secretary-General of EUDIF (European women's network for documentation and information).

Laurence Benaïm, in the 16 September 1995 issue of "Le Monde", published an article - to my knowledge the only one on the cultural theme - which examined the identity of the women present in Huairou and Beijing, through their clothing. The Europeans and the Americans did not stand out amidst the colours, the fashions and the festivities in Huairou. On the contrary, the Africans, the Asians, their diversity was obvious.

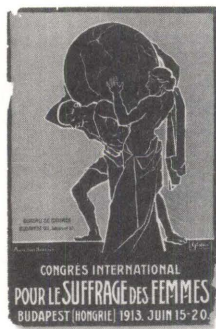
Such observations on the cultural regression of European women, "in the image of declining humanistic values of which the art of living is one mode of expression", she says, lead me to the following question: what is the heritage of our European identity and in what form can it be expressed in an international assembly?

Will the "political correctness" of the USA invade Europe with its standards which restrain individuality? Will it do so to the point of extinguishing the dynamism of, for example, the Norwegians who, on the occasion of the winter Olympic Games, were able to project a vision of society in which respect for the environment and nature, integrated into the organization of private and public life, has shaped a culture and given political value

to fraternity and collective human responsibility: that of the younger towards the older and of the strong towards the weak. Will political correctness also invade to the point where we will forget the beauty and the human warmth of the people of the South who remind us that even in adversity, life has a smile, a laugh, and that to forget that is to die just a little? What purpose then do culture and human rights serve? None, reply those who have omitted from their "economically correct" objectives the identity of peoples and cultures.

And yet, there it was right under our noses in Beijing, the call for history, culture, passion! What better proof than the extraordinary number of women and men who came from around the world, for four days, to visit an international exhibit on the history of feminism and to ask the European Commission, which had supported the event, to pursue the development of images which promote exchanges, words, emotion, between the women and the humanists of the world. It was essential, therefore, to create such a cultural site, but other possible forms of expressing the cultural identity of Europeans also exist. In this future perspective, the association of our artists, artisans, creators would allow for this dimension of life to be expressed fully and would portray another image than that of a money-based civilisation. Europe, invisible in Huairou, would shine in all its differences and in all its cultural riches. ●

One out of every two men is a woman: a look at international feminism



Poster from the Beijing exhibit, "One out of every two men is a woman: a look at international feminism".

A cultural event organised at the European level for the 4th World Conference, an exhibit of historic posters was held from 6 to 10 September in the Conference Centre in Beijing. The sixty-two posters from Europe and the rest of the world illustrated the persistent battles women fought for their civil and political rights at the turn of the century, as well as the opinion of women or women's groups on issues such as war, incest, violence against women, abortion, etc. Other posters evoked the large international women's conferences such as the international congress for women's suffrage (Budapest, 1913), the international tribunal for crimes against women (Brussels, 1977), the 30th anniversary of the women's popular library (Valencia 1934) or the International League of Women's conference for peace and liberty (Prague, 1929).

The transport to and installation in Paris of the exhibit organised by EUDIF (European women's network for documentation and information) was financed by the European Commission (DG X). The posters were part of the original exhibit of the same name, organised by two Belgian associations, Mundaneum and the Emilienne Brunfaut Foundation, presented in Mons from 11 February to 12 March 1995. The exhibit will again be held in Belgium from 1 to 27 December at Espace Folon, rue des Nerviens, B-1300 Wavre. It is open every day from 11.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., and on Saturday from 2.00 to 6.00 p.m. Closed Monday. ●

Young and feminist

Isabelle Stewart

A young Franco-British woman travelled on the "Women's train for Beijing"

Young people were not forgotten in Beijing nor in Huairou. It was one of the Conference's and the Forum's main themes. Younger women nonetheless felt somewhat uncomfortable in the large tent devoted to youth - a nursery, meeting-, discussion- and reflection room all in one - and

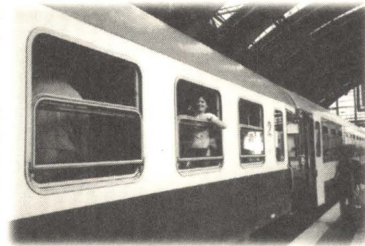


found it difficult to fit in. Of course, the problem of "girl children" was discussed, but so were employment, development, health and peace. As a young woman, I was tempted to go directly to the other Fo-

rum sites to discuss the issues "like a big person".

But there too we had the confusing impression of being unwelcome, ignorant as we were of the established theories. It was difficult to contradict the hardened feminists. Especially when they are the same women who fought to obtain the rights that seem so basic to us today. But our "official" place in the Platform gave us the courage to have our opinions and the strength to discuss them with the "veterans".

Perhaps it was during the women's train for Beijing adventure, in which I participated, that the problem of communication between the different generations of women and feminists was best addressed during the informal discussions in work shops. The journey gave the young



women present the opportunity to explain to the older women that the terms of the "fight" for equality had changed. For example, if these women - feminists or not - fought men with little sympathy, the men of our generation were their sons, raised by them in an environment where equality was important. And that the concept of male feminists is not as absurd today as it was thirty years ago. It was also an opportunity to convince us of the importance of "women's areas", not as areas where men are excluded, but as a place of discovery or re-discovery of the culture and history of women. In the train, as at the NGO Forum, the message was loud and clear: young women of today are feminists and have their role in the movement, even if to re-define the term "feminist". ●



Beijing, an important phase for women's rights

Marie-Françoise Stewart-Ebel

has followed the evolution of women's emancipation since the first U.N. World Conference in Mexico City

When, on 15 September, the largest Conference ever organised by the U.N. drew to a close, one could almost hear the sighs of relief of the women tired after two weeks of intense work carried out in often difficult conditions. And behind the official tone of the closing ceremony, there was real joy in having succeeded "a difficult labour" by approving the Declaration and the Action Platform.

The 4th World Conference on Women was an important phase in the process started by the UN in 1975. The first World Conference in Mexico City focused on the progress of women's status and the launching of the international Year and Decade of the Woman. For the very first time, world governments pledged to adopt a specific policy aiming at eliminating discrimination between women and men. And much progress has been made since then: In 1980 in Copenhagen, priority was given to women's health, education and employment; in 1985 in Nairobi, women demanded the recognition of violence aimed specifically at women and the adoption of development policies which would take account of their needs.

Twenty years later, in Beijing, the objective was to confirm fundamental women's rights, notably in economic, political and sexual terms and to determine whether or

not "cultural differences" justify the specific discrimination committed against women from the time of infancy. But it was especially a question of taking account of a societal project defined by women in response to the globalisation of the economy and the effects thereof. The process seems already to have taken root at the previous large UN Conferences: In Rio, the role played by women in sustainable development was recognised; in Vienna, women's rights were recognised as fundamental rights; in Cairo, reproduction rights were integrated into population policies; and finally, the social summit in Copenhagen recognised the key role of women in the battle against poverty and social exclusion.

When the Beijing Conference began, however, it was widely feared that the gains made by women over the past 20 years would be lost. Indeed, 438 phrases in the text were placed "in brackets", i.e. they were to be negotiated by the governments before the text as a whole could be adopted. The problems lay, in particular, in sexual rights and in the definition of the family. For women, it was a question of whether or not the gains made at the Conferences in Vienna and Cairo would be renegotiated.

The success of Beijing is connected, first and foremost, to the unanimous adoption of the Action Platform and the Declaration which affirm the equality of the sexes and the fundamental rights of women. The text gives women, in conditions of equality, access to the social and economic process and confirms women's right to freely decide on their own sexuality. The

chapter on the elimination of poverty could become an important instrument in the hands of women in developing countries. The importance attributed to the rights of "girl children" also lends hope for the future, in particular the commitments made to education. If the absence of specific agreement on important issues such as the women's slave trade is disappointing, the fact that rape of women in times of armed conflict is considered a crime against humanity and an act of genocide is a major step forward.

The main task at hand now is to persuade governments to take account of a text which is not restrictive in character. The declaration made by the European Union's Council of Ministers is encouraging. It affirms that the Member States shall work closely with NGOs to implement the measures of the Action Platform so that the "European Union may continue to play the same key role that it played at the Beijing Conference". A tremendous responsibility lies in the hands of the women's associations and NGOs present in such large numbers in Beijing. The Forum was not merely a place of daily bustling activity. It confirmed that women constitute a political force to be reckoned with in the future.

Affirming in her closing speech that the Conference had made substantial gains for equality, Cristina Alberdi Alonso, president of the European Union's official delegation added, rightly so, that from now on there would be a "pre- and post-Beijing" in the history of womankind. ●

Committee on Women's Rights

Chaired by Nel Van Dijk, the Committee on Women's Rights adopted, during their meeting on 26 and 27 September, an opinion on the 1996 Community budget proposal. It examined a draft report on the Fourth Action Programme for Equal Opportunities as well as a series of opinion proposals concerning, notably, the follow-up of the White Paper, the accession of the countries of Eastern Europe, the slave trade of human beings and the "Poverty 3" programme. A preliminary debate on the Beijing Conference was also launched.

Unanimously adopting Nel Van Dijk's opinion addressed to the Budget Committee, the Committee on Women's Rights presented a series of amendments to the budget which aim at reinforcing the financing of actions for the promotion of women. In particular, it requested new budget allocations for aid to women victims of the slave trade and for aid to pilot projects for the reconciliation of career and family life. Additional financing for development, health, training and women's representation was also requested as was financing for actions promoting access for young girls to careers in science, equal opportunities in the reconstruction of the countries of Eastern Europe and the fight against poverty and exclusion of women.

With regard to the Beijing Conference, the delegates agreed that it had been positive, even though some issues such as those concerning sexual rights were not included in the final text. The efforts of the Spanish presidency and the fact that the European Union was able to speak with a single voice were commended, but the Committee is now concerned about the implementation of the Platform which should be integrated into the Fourth Action Programme for Equality.

Finally, "very concerned" by the conclusions of the Advocate-General of the European Court of Justice in the case of "Kalanke versus the City of Bremen" which re-examines positive discrimination, the Committee adopted a declaration in which it underscores the risks involved in eliminating measures which encourage equal opportunities. ●

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info

European Young Consumer Competition 1996

Since its creation in 1994, over 35,000 young people aged 12 to 14 from schools in the 15 Member States have participated in the European Young Consumer Competition. The upcoming 1996 edition will carry the theme "The impact of consumer behaviour on the environment". As in the previous years, the initiative aims at inciting young people to become responsible citizens with regard to the protection of the environment by raising their awareness of the consequences of their daily consumer behaviour. To participate, they must create informative material (posters, slides, video documents or magazines) on a theme related to consumption. The entries will first be submitted to a national jury, then, if selected, to a European jury in Brussels.

The national juries will select a maximum of 20 entries, each awarded with a prize of ECU 300, and will award the three best teams with an additional prize of ECU 700, 400 and 200. Each Member State will send to Brussels five young peo-

ple from the winning team, accompanied by an adult, to participate in the European final where the three winning teams of that competition will receive respectively ECU 2,500, 2,000 and 1,500. The competition is open to classes or groups of young people from the Member States of the European Union. The deadline for entries is 17 January, 1996 and entry forms as well as the groups' work must be sent to coordinators before 2 April 1996. ●

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council

The image of women and men in advertising and the media

The stereotypes tied to the sexes in advertising and the media constitute one of the persistent factors of inequality between women and men and contribute to the lack of change in the attitudes and mentalities as to the role of women and men in society. Meeting in October in Brussels, the ministers of Social Affairs recognised that an improvement in and a new approach to advertising and the media can "make an important contribution to changing attitudes in society, by reflecting the diversity of roles and potentials of women and men, their participation in all aspects of social life, as well as the more equal distribution of family, professional and social responsibilities between women and men".

In their resolution, they invite the Member States as well as the authorities competent on matters regarding the press, advertising and media to promote a more favourable image of the potentials and skills of men and women in their country. This could be done by adopting specific measures such as research or information and awareness campaigns on equal opportunities and the more equal distribution of family and professional responsibilities between women and men in society. Such actions could target, in particular, advertising agencies, the media and the general public and would allow for potential sources of discrimination and sexual stereotyping to be identified and avoided. The ministers also point out the necessity to give particular attention to the values tied to equal opportunities in all forms and at all levels of education and training and, particularly, in the training of advertising and media professionals. Finally, they agree on the need to promote equal participation of women and men in production bodies and in decision-making positions in advertising and the media. ●