

RANDOM REFLECTIONS ON THE BEIJING CONFERENCE

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"I feel the power of women now!" exclaimed the young lawyer from Hong Kong, seated next to me at the Global Tribunal at the NGO Forum...

The Fourth World Conference on Women (held from 4 - 15 September '95), and the parallel Non-governmental (NGO) Forum on Women (held from 30 August - 8 September '95) both sailed in choppy waters, and created ripples the world over, during the latter part of last year.

I was among over fifty other Sri Lankan women who had the opportunity of attending the NGO Forum on Women, held in Huairou, a forty-five-minute drive away from the UN Conference site in Beijing.

The main task of the NGO Forum was to influence the draft Platform-for-Action debated at the parallel UN World Conference on Women. The nearly forty thousand women who converged at the forty-two hectare Forum site in Huairou, partook in over 8,000 programs and spontaneous activities ranging from economics, politics, religion, ethnicity, youth and lesbian rights to the rights of older women, indigenous peoples and minorities. The grand Forum '95 opening ceremony held at the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, launched the NGO Forum to an impassioned start with over thirty thousand women holding hands in the weaving of a global women's solidarity network.

I would like to focus first on three issues that were highlighted over and over again in the plenaries and the other programs held during the nine days in Huairou:

- (1) Rise of conservatism and fundamentalism;
- (2) Visibility
- (3) Accountability.

Conservatism

The first issue is the prime reason why both the NGO Forum and the UN Conference sailed in choppy waters. The liberal versus conservative tug-of-war that raged over the much publicized "holy brackets" in the Platform-for-Action, with progressive women's activists lobbying for children's rights, reproductive rights and sexual rights, etc; and the "Holy See" by way of the Vatican Church, and the Islamic *Mullahs* lobbying for regressive conservatism through the curbing of women's right to reproductive and sexual freedom, had the entire Conference rocking in a high

tide. Thus naturally, Forum participants were forced to focus troubled eyes not only upon conservatism visualized within the Forum site, but also upon the growing tide of non/religious fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. The issue became so crucial that one of the plenaries at the Forum was dedicated to discussing conservatism as a global force. "Forum '95", the Forum daily, frequently carried editorial comments, articles and explicit cartoons condemning conservatism. The 3rd September "Forum '95" editorial had the following opening paragraph on global conservatism and its inevitable link with women:

Liberals the world over are concerned by the swelling tide of conservatism. Women are especially worried. Religious (and non-religious) conservatives may belong to many faiths and disagree about many things, but they all believe in keeping women in their place...

This global trend found ample physical expression even within the Forum site in the myriad (Middle Eastern) women attired from head to toe in the black *hijab*, accompanied by the inevitable male spokesperson-companion. On the other hand, the most adamant opposition to the "Islamization" of society within the Forum also came from the Islamic women themselves: the most commonly heard slogan of the Iranian women protesting at the Forum site was, "Religion! Hands off women's lives!" This slogan, according to an Iranian women's activist, had been deliberately designed "to go beyond the Islamic world and to include other religions." This counter-fundamentalist "secular" stand has also been emphasized by many an activist as not merely a system of values that looks towards an absence of patriarchal religious practices at the end of the road; but as a political tool which anticipates a world order free of all types of oppressions:

it should not be a ... change in which turbans are substituted by hats and Mullahs give place to military or civilian clothed oppressors. (Forum '95; 3 September)

In this context, it is also interesting to note how Islamic women were perceived at the Forum as having a legitimate "license" to articulate the ills of Islamic fundamentalism, but not other types of human rights violations. For example, I witnessed the rude interruption of a protest march by a *hijab*-clad delegation protesting ironically on human rights violations in Bosnia, by a group of black Sudanese women who shouted, "Charity begins at home! So why don't you protest about your own human rights violations back home?" The obvious implication here was that any protest on non-Islamic issues by Islamic women was the work of the *Mullahs* who held the strings

by which they controlled their veiled women as one would manipulate puppets. Thus, it is possible that this protest on Bosnian human rights violations by Islamic women too could have been perceived by the majority as an attempt to distract the masses from the burning problem: Islamic fundamentalism. Nevertheless this incident highlights how sensitive an issue fundamentalism was at the Forum, and it is in this context that the comment made by Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, becomes doubly significant:

Stop the backward-looking elements from rolling back Women's Rights...

Visibility

The second issue, visibility, almost became the unofficial theme of the Forum with the Conference's "star participant", Ms. Hillary Clinton who led the U.S. delegation, calling for an end to "the history of silence" by women. In looking at the ten years that paved the way to Beijing, from the Nairobi Conference in 1985, Beijing could certainly be listed as a Conference that shattered "the Great Wall of Silences". In the entire Forum, the issue that moved me the most was a story of visibility and articulation: the story of the Filipino comfort women or *lolas*, who were victims of sexual slavery and violence by the Japanese military during the Second World War.

Most of these *lolas* were between 13 to 16 years of age when they were kidnapped, gang raped and kept by the Japanese military. So today, we are actually talking of about fifty years of pent up and unarticulated grief and pain of these women...

said one activist working with a Comfort Women Survivors Program in the Philippines. Lila-Philippina an organization of Filipino Comfort Women, rape survivors as well as individual advocates for redress on account of the human's rights abuses and injustices of the Filipino Comfort Women, has at last succeeded in shattering the silence that enveloped the issue of the Comfort Women for almost half a century. Nelia Sancho of Lila-Philippina, in *Sauti Ya Siti*, A Tanzanian women's magazine, remarks thus:

We know by now that comfort women were raped and tortured. For almost fifty years the Japanese government sought to hide this reality. For almost fifty years, we the survivors bravely lived in silence...

[Today] Throughout Asia, we will continue to raise our voices high, across distances of our vast continent. Ours are voices of hope and struggle... (*Sauti Ya Siti*, Beijing 1995)

Thinking back on this issue which had brought tears to my eyes, on my way back from Beijing, I suddenly realized that my tears had been not so much for the pain of these women as for their *silent pain*; that my tears had been for the system which operated through absence.

The Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights, perhaps the single event attended by the most number of people and the Tribunal on Violence and Crimes against Women, through their hearing of individual women's testimonies on human rights violations, visibilized the silent suffering of diverse women from diverse backgrounds all over the world. The Global Tribunal featured the testimonies of twenty-two women, under the broad areas of violence against women in the family and conflict situations, economic discrimination and exploitation, violations of health and bodily integrity and political persecution.

Accountability

The issue of visibility, though of prime significance when viewed in context, needs to be essentially qualified here, since the Forum actually witnessed a subtle shift in focus from visibility to accountability. Thus, the Global Tribunal called for *Accountability* of women's human rights abuses. Similarly, at an informal dialogue session I attended at the Global Human Rights Education Training and Resource Institute which was presided over by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the emphasis of the questions posed was upon accountability for various human rights abuses committed. (I quote the impassioned words of a Bosnian woman directed at the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights here, "I demand from you nothing but **accountability** ... **Accountability** for the crimes committed against women and children in Bosnia!"...)

It should be mentioned in this context that the issue of the *lolas* too was one which moved way beyond mere visibility. Lila-Philippina the support organization for Filipino comfort women was an active participant in the Asia Tribunal on Women's Human Rights held in Tokyo in 1994, where a declaration was produced which named and condemned Japan's "Operation Comfort Women" as a war crime and condemned this and all other acts of military sexual slavery. The Tokyo Tribunal produced a Plan of Action and recommendations specific to the issue of Comfort Women, which included full investigation and data gathering, trial and punishment of criminals, guaranteed compensation for survivors, public education and strengthening of international solidarity.

Sexual Rights

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women gains significance as the first conference to have ever articulated the issue of "sexual rights" (which became the much bruised subject of the radical versus conservative tug-of-war). Surprisingly, sexual rights is not just any new topic; it is a new topic in the global agenda and it has not been addressed in any UN Conference previously, including the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development. The main task of the Conference was the discussion, deliberation and adoption of the main Conference document the draft Platform-for-Action, sixty per cent of which was enclosed within brackets at the start of the Conference, denoting areas of dispute. The most sensitive areas, needless to say, remained those concerning parental responsibility, abortion, reproductive rights,

sexual rights and sexual orientation. For example, Paragraph 97 of the draft Platform-for-Action states thus:

Sexual rights include the individual's right to have control over and decide freely on matters related to her or his sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the physical integrity of the human body, require mutual consent and willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of sexual behaviour.

It is significant that a watered down version of the above paragraph, which was previously within brackets, was finally agreed upon by one Working Group at the Conference. Throughout the Conference, the terms "sexual rights" and "sexual orientation" were laced with homophobic feelings, in that both the Holy See and the Islamic Mullahs perceived the term as condoning "abnormal sexual liaisons" such as gay and lesbian relations. For instance, Iran and other Islamic countries agreed upon the above text on the condition that they viewed the contents of it solely within the institution of (heterosexual) marriage. In this context it is interesting to note that back in Sri Lanka too, there were indications that the "Beijing Conference" in general was viewed in a strongly misogynist and homophobic light, where the entire Conference was perceived as a strip tease act where lesbians, prostitutes and sex workers "went public with shameful acts which should have rightfully shocked the world."

It is also significant that while the Vatican accused the European Union of attempting to remove all reference to religion and motherhood from key sections of the draft Platform-for-Action, Hon. Srimani Athulathmudali, who led the government delegation to the UN Conference, should echo the concerns of the Holy See in her speech thus:

The mother remains to be the most respected member in the institution of the family and this should not be forgotten in our deliberations...

Relevance

Though much was achieved amidst diversity at the Forum, a minor incident drove home to me as never before the fact that "we come from different worlds". The incident occurred while I was co-facilitating a workshop organized by a Young Women's Working Group on Women and Violence from Columbia University in the U.S. During a brainstorming session at the workshop on problems faced by young women the world over, the group, which had a marked majority of young (middle class) women from the United States both black and white (as the case was in the Forum

as a whole), repeatedly came up with issues such as sexual harassment in campus, racism, drugs, etc. Suddenly I asked:

Hasn't anybody heard of "youth unrest" ?
Has it got anything to do with drugs ?
No, I think it's really a social problem with an economic base.... and it's a burning issue in my country
Okay, let's talk about it. Do you see it as a phenomenon that is particular to your country ?

Suddenly I saw how ridiculous and superficial the whole issue had become. How was I going to make a group of middle class college students from the U.S. see the complexity of a problem whose sensitive parameters continued to evade even the most committed of scholars to this date? How was I going to make them see the subtle and invisible links between the Free Education policy of '45, the welfare state of the '50s, the *Swabhasha* Act of '56, the economic crisis of the '70s, the youth insurrection of '71, the open economy policies launched in '77, the JVP insurgency of '87-'89 and the phenomenon of (educated) youth unemployment in the '90s where female unemployment is almost treble that of male unemployment, etc.?

It is when viewed in the above context, that the implications of global power politics behind Ms. Clinton's condemnation of the so called shoddy treatment of the Conference participants by the Chinese, and the radical versus conservative tug-of-war on women's sexual rights, seem to have little tangible bearing on women in Sri Lanka, the majority of whom are subjects of the mass-scale exploitation of female labor, both locally and abroad. Perhaps, it is opportune at this juncture to focus on the words of Gertrude Mongella, once again:

The Fourth World Conference on Women is a Conference to challenge and change the status quo, to end "business as usual".

Despite significant gains, I do not know whether the Conference succeeded in ending the business of "business as usual"...

I cannot go home
until you have taken everything
and the basket which held it

When my hands are empty
I will be full...*

* "A give-away poem" by Chrystos read at the end of a workshop session at the Forum.