

In the Beijing+5 trenches

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Since the 1970s, women's international networks have developed solid expertise in regard to UN negotiations. Up until now, however, we have not been able to share that expertise adequately within or beyond the feminist field. This shortcoming must be overcome, among other reasons because, in the current global political climate, women's organisations will face new and greater challenges.

By the late 1980s, development NGO's and social movements had begun a systematic involvement in global political arenas, particularly in the United Nations. Women's organisations, however, have interacted in those spaces for a quarter of a century, starting with the 1975 Mexico conference, followed by the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Copenhagen conference (1980), Nairobi (1985), and the intense global feminist politics in the 1990's. From the perspective of building a global gender-equality and women's human rights agenda, Beijing+5 was another station in the long and winding road of feminist interactions with the United Nations.

Since the 1970s, women's international networks have developed solid expertise in regard to UN negotiations. This expertise is comparable only to the global political capacity of the environmental movement. Up until now, however, we have not been able to share that expertise adequately within or beyond the feminist field. At each new UN negotiation, it is as if we were beginning anew. This clearly happened in Beijing+5 and it was one of the factors that endangered the outcome of the negotiations. This shortcoming must be overcome, among other reasons because, in the current global political climate, women's organisations will face new and greater challenges

Historical background

In the 1970s and 1980s, political factors conditioning UN negotiations were characterised by the harsh tensions of bi-polarity. The climate in the 1990s was different, but some of the actors and tensions had not changed and, to a large extent, continued to play a determining role in negotiations for gender equality and human rights. The tensions and alliances among the G-7, the G-77 and the Vatican that were critical in the 1970s also dominated the 1990 conferences. Since the 1970s, the tension, if not opposition, between the "right to development" (as a synthesis of issues rooted in global economics) and women's rights has marked UN conferences.

For example, in 1985, prior to Nairobi, a group of Latin-American feminists visited Havana to convince Fidel Castro of the relevance of gender equality and its correlation to macroeconomic issues. This conversation was successful and Cuba systematically assumed very progressive positions regarding women's rights at the UN. Beijing+5 was an exception, however, as the positions of the Cuban delegation were not predominantly motivated by its historical commitment to gender equality, but rather determined by North-South economic tensions and particularly by the sanctions against Cuba and Havana-Washington relations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the same tensions were at play within the feminist field itself, particularly in regard to the differences between Northern and Southern women's agendas. In the 1990s, these tensions were gradually resolved as the agenda of gender justice was articulated and legitimised at the global policy level in a series of UN conferences. This global feminist consensus was anchored in the indivisibility, integrality and universality of human rights, as adopted in Vienna, and the notion that an enabling political and economic environment is prerequisite for fulfilling women's rights.

Despite the bi-polar tensions, CEDAW resulted from 1970's UN negotiations. Its political significance, however, was not fully acknowledged by women's organisations until global feminist politics intensified in the late 1990s. Only in the aftermath of Beijing was CEDAW's potential as an instrument for guaranteeing women's human rights understood and broadly used by women's organisations worldwide. In 2000, its potential was further expanded with the adoption of the Optional Protocol, which establishes new rules and procedures for appeals, including collective legal initiatives and claims. At this new stage in global feminist politics, CEDAW has emerged as an important tool for effective implementation of the Vienna, Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen recommendations.

Gender justice in the context of globalisation

To fully analyse the Beijing+5 outcomes, we must initially address the problems that arise from linking gender justice and economic justice in the current context of globalisation. On the one hand, the world is witnessing the primacy of free trade and deep and increasing wealth and income inequalities. On the other, religious and ethnic identities are reasserting "traditional" authority and gender control systems that are often openly patriarchal.

Rosalind Petchesky, who closely followed the Beijing and Copenhagen+5 processes, argues:

"Meanwhile, the state (that is, most national government apparatuses, especially in developing countries)... still clings to patriarchy as their last, best stronghold in the face of the inexorable globalisation of power. Although I am not one who subscribes to the thesis that the state is in decline ... it does seem to me that issues about family life, gender divisions, sexuality and reproduction, as well as environmental and labour standards, constitute a terrain on which 'national sovereignty' is waging its final battle." (Reflections on "World Summit for Social Development and Beyond", June 2000).

What we witnessed in the Beijing+5 process was somewhat more complex. South-North economic struggles provide fertile ground for the surfacing of other tensions. But many of the hard-core governments that opposed women's human rights in the negotiations would have done so regardless of the economic struggles. Nor are these economic struggles simply over national sovereignty; they are a mixed bag of battles over exclusion from globalisation, or over its spoils. What happened during Beijing+5 was that these struggles were shifted into the gender arena because women's movements in the South still do not have enough strength to prevent our governments from selling us out.

Recent experiences in global political arenas suggest that even when governments do not assume openly patriarchal tones, the South-North economic struggles tend to relegate women's priorities to the back burner or to another "occasion". Those who defend and promote Northern economic interests often support positions to promote gender equality and women's human rights. But it is no simple task to convince those actors and sectors that their unconditional support for the current North-biased parameters of the globalised economy are key to explaining the maintenance and even reactivation of values and control systems that openly oppress women.

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In this light, the political progress observed in the 1990s' conferences must be credited to the strategic capacity of global feminist networks to keep a steady sail between the *Scylla* of fundamentalism and the *Charybdis* of the Northern economic agenda. The same dynamics were at play in the review processes just concluded. The 1999 Cairo+5 review indicated the risks threatening the contemporary global feminist agenda. The Beijing+5 negotiations were even tenser and more difficult.

One factor contributing to this situation was the challenge to global economic trends manifested in the civil society demonstrations at the Seattle WTO meeting in December 1999, followed by Washington (April, 2000), Melbourne and Prague (September 2000). Those events continue to have an impact on the UN General Assembly Second Commission where economic themes are debated. We also observe a "rebirth" of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as a global actor, thus reactivating the historical political platform of Islamic countries. In addition, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) operation in Kosovo, in early 2000, brought forth reactions to US and European military hegemony from several quarters. Concurrently, criticism of the social impact of economic embargoes against Cuba and Iraq has expanded. Last but not least, the case of the Cuban boy Elián, although mainly a media phenomenon, directly affected Havana-Washington relations and had an impact on the Beijing+5 process.

Institutional dynamics

The UN institutional environment of the late 1990s differed from conditions that prevailed in 1993, 1994 and 1995, when the agenda for gender justice and women's rights was legitimised. First of all, a review process is not a conference: it has less autonomy and less appeal for governments. It is guided by the UN General Assembly and is inevitably "contaminated" by the Assembly's political dynamics. This "distinct nature of the review processes" was manifest in both Cairo+5 and Beijing+5 by the strong presence of delegates from New York-based UN missions, instead of capital envoys.

In both cases, the profile of negotiating delegates was quite problematic. Mission delegates are usually attached to routine agendas related to macroeconomic issues or to the Security Council. Other agendas, particularly women's agendas, are minimised. Mission delegates are more easily influenced (not to say corrupted) by the Vatican and US antiabortionists who systematically lobby the New York missions. Finally, the "review model", as currently adopted by the UN is wrong because diplomats do not have the capacity to evaluate policy implementation. The diplomats' task is to negotiate agreements, while review processes encompass technical aspects. Ideally, those who actually implement the recommendations of various conferences should do the reviews.

Governments do not invest properly in early stages of the review process and tend to simply devote attention to the very last stage when the document reaches the General Assembly Special Session. Quite often delegations attending the initial phases of the review are not adequately prepared. Cairo+5 and Beijing+5 both had an amazing turnover of country delegates between the first and last negotiations. Over 50% of delegates from capitals were not familiar with the original documents or with the great controversies linked to the text under negotiation. Above all, there was a disparity between "mission delegates" who opposed the agenda for gender-justice and the more progressive delegates arriving from capitals. Consequently, at Cairo+5 and Beijing+5, a fundamental task of the international women's networks was to inform, support and orient the "friendly delegations".

Institutional factors also played a role. Since the late 1970s, a "division of labour" has been crystallising among the various global governance institutions. The UN was increasingly left to deal with soft (social) issues, while hard issues became the mandate of WTO, World Bank-IMF, and OECD. As a consequence, both governments and NGOs are starting to view the UN as "hardly relevant".

The UN has adopted a new media style. Since Cairo+5, media operations are seen as more important than the very substance under negotiation. This strategy showed its weakness at both Cairo+5 and Beijing+5. As it became clear that negotiations could fail (without a final document), it was also evident that good media coverage could not necessarily erase the failure. In the particular case of Beijing+5, it was pathetic (if not schizophrenic), at the very last moments, to see thousands of women in the corridors talking to the world through CNN, while negotiations continued under very difficult conditions, without any communication linking the two spaces.

Secretary General Kofi Annan seems to prefer "concerted action, collaboration, dialogue, and tolerance". This was the tone of the Millennium Summit, whose final message said that we are all together, joining hands, to resolve the dramatic problems currently affecting the planet. Undoubtedly, this preference is positive and should be supported in the area of conflict resolution, which under Anan has become the key mandate of the UN system. As a result of this strategic choice, however, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) negotiations move in an extremely cautious mode when controversial issues are at stake. But it is very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid controversy when dealing with issues such as gender relations, abortion and sexuality.

The negotiations

Very early in the Cairo+5 and Beijing+5 processes, it became evident that the main strategy of forces opposing gender equality and women's human rights was to block the adoption of a final document. Their aim was to prevent any document at all, except perhaps a completely vacuous, toothless political statement. Conservative forces were not interested in reviewing implementation; they were bent on undoing the consensus reached in Vienna, Cairo and Beijing.

At Cairo+5, the Chair of the Main Committee, Bangladesh's Ambassador Chowdhuri, then coordinating the process (and now seated at the Security Council), strongly oriented the process to ensure a positive outcome. In addition, after the March PrepCom, the United Nations Family Planning Agency (UNFPA) perceived that it could lose donor country funding if the review process came up with only a two-page statement after all the exhausting and expensive sessions. At Beijing+5, however, not having a final document was an ever-present threat. Insidious manoeuvres to gut the process continued to the wee hours of June 9, with attempts to eliminate from the final document text that had been adopted in Beijing (*e.g.*, paragraph 96 defining the content of women's sexual rights).

Efforts of potentially "friendly" countries—including the EU and JUSZCANS—were weak in the first stage of negotiation. It seemed at times that these countries did not care if the negotiations failed, since they had their own programs in place. In other words, they were reckless with the global meaning of the negotiations. This phlegmatic attitude disappeared under the strong pressure of women's organisations.

US-based moral conservative forces intervened massively at Cairo+5 and Beijing+5, an effort that included close contacts with G-77 delegates. The UN may seem to some a watered-down political arena, but the presence of these forces in its meeting rooms and corridors suggests that it is not a good idea to abandon it as a strategic global political space.

The formation of SLAC (Some Latin American Countries) in this context was relevant. SLAC is a negotiating group that rid itself of G-77 during the May Beijing+5 inter-sessional meetings. Before becoming a group with its own identity, SLAC struggled bravely within G-77 to avoid weak consensus. At Beijing+5, SLAC greatly facilitated final negotiations, making it possible to overcome the systematic paralysis of G-77: there was no negotiation because G-77 was not ready and G-77 would never be ready because conservative forces did not want a document. Caribbean countries and Mexico gradually joined SLAC positions, as did India (on some issues) and some African countries, particularly South Africa. SLAC was an ephemeral phenomenon with huge importance. There is a strategic need for a global negotiating bloc positioned in the South that consistently links economic justice and gender justice.

The substantive agreements

Topics that were considered “hot” in 1995 remained on the agenda, especially the issues of sexual rights and the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation. At Beijing+5, however, conservative forces also manifested strong resistance to apparently less polemical issues such as violence against women, ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, quotas for political participation, strengthening institutional mechanisms for promoting women’s rights, and indicators to evaluate policies. Almost no area was free from heated debates.

Regarding North-South tensions, the old issue of additional ODA resources was on the table, but new impasses emerged regarding globalisation and governance. “Military” issues were added to the hard kernel of the North-South confrontation. Sanctions, unilateral coercive measures, eradication of anti-personnel mines, reduction of nuclear weapons, and terrorism were extensively debated and often used to stall the negotiations. This suggests that North-South economic tensions are now appearing in combination with harsh frictions stemming from the wealthy countries’ global military hegemony. To a certain extent, the conflicts experienced at Beijing+5 can be depicted in the form of new global policy imagery. No longer strictly polarised between women’s human rights and the unequal global economic order, the new imagery includes polarisation between “military power”, on the one hand, and “sexual rights”, or more broadly speaking, sexuality, on the other.

Despite these unfavourable conditions, the final Beijing+5 document is good. It does not backtrack on abortion, sexual rights and family issues—the main targets of the conservative attack. It expands the Beijing definitions on gender violence and contains a series of strategic definitions on gender and poverty and gender and economy (mainstreaming). As in WSSD+5, it was not possible to grasp more firmly the gender dimensions of the macroeconomic debate. The text does not even mention the initiative on finance for development or the proposal to tax financial transactions (as was mentioned in the Hague Forum Report for Cairo+5).

Feminist Impact on WSSD+5

There was an enormous imbalance in the number of women’s organisations’ present at Beijing+5 and at WSSD+5. In 2000, the pattern observed in 1995 was repeated: while “everybody” was in Beijing, only a small group of women’s organisations and networks accompanied WSSD+5. The broader development-oriented NGO community, however, focused almost exclusively on Copenhagen and left Beijing+5 to women’s organisations. This imbalance reflects the conventional gender division of labour: women take care of their own issues, while men take care of the economy. In DAWN’s view, dialogues and joint advocacy efforts between feminist and development-oriented global networks are urgently required to overcome this persistent imbalance.

Despite the imbalance, however, there were important gender-related gains at WSSD+5 that must be added to the gains achieved at Beijing+5. Among the most significant were the definitions in paragraphs 73 and 76 dealing with access of HIV-AIDS patients to medication and treatment. Those definitions, led by South Africa under pressure from women’s networks, are directly linked to TRIPS and WTO negotiations. Two losses should also be mentioned. The document does not mention CEDAW and the Optional Protocol. Also, under Vatican pressure, the recommendation to make masculine and feminine condoms accessible, particularly in Africa, was eliminated.

Looking forward

The storm is over, and once again, the feminist agenda survived. Nothing indicates that the work ahead will be easier than the work up to now. The number and complexity of tasks will expand. For instance, the political climate at the UN is already being affected by the Bush administration on “moral issues” (such as abortion) and on economic issues. Without exhausting the subject, we would like to indicate a brief list of challenges that will face global feminist networks in the years to come:

- National agendas derived from Beijing in 1995 need to incorporate the achievements of the +5 review process. It is critical to resume and focus the debate on sexual rights, including definitions regarding violence (rape, crimes of honour, forced pregnancy and systematic rape). It is also necessary to incorporate recommendations related to gender, macro economy and poverty. Above all, it is vital to prioritise effective implementation of CEDAW and press for signing the Optional Protocol.
- At the global level, lessons should be drawn from the +5 process for preparation of the World Conference on Racism. A second critical task is to take up the issue of UN system reform and also to closely accompany the debate on “Financing for Development”.
- It is also urgent to build a new consensus regarding methods and procedures for review of policy implementation. There is already talk and some enthusiasm about Beijing+10. In DAWN’s view, we should be cautious and sober in regard to this proposal. If future evaluations are not carried out according to new methods and criteria, it is better that they do not occur. As Juan Somavia said in 1995, we no longer need agendas, we need implementation. Or as Bella Abzug said many times: “The words are the music, we need the dance of action.” Evaluations are necessary, but they require indicators and must be done technically and objectively. They should not be transformed into occasions to undo previous consensus.
- The recent experience of women’s networks in global arenas suggests that we should focus on existing instruments and mechanisms with a view to impregnating them with the concepts and contents we managed to legitimise and consolidate over the last decade. It is high time we go beyond the good times of conferences and summits. We should strategically invest our efforts in CEDAW, establish more organic linkages with the UN High Commission and the International Criminal Court, and make a greater commitment to the agendas of specialised agencies. In the same vein, we should systematically accompany regional processes such as ECLAC, MERCOSUR, ADB and others.
- Above all, we need to compile, transmit, and share what we have accumulated in terms of global feminist advocacy, and shift the focus to other strategic arenas such as the Bretton Woods system, WTO and OECD. This is not exactly a “simple” shift, since the technical and political requisites to intervene in those spaces are colossal. Although the scope and scale of the challenges ahead are great, the experience of the last decade was not irrelevant. It can and should provide the global women’s movement with the required analytical and advocacy skills to move forward. What is urgently needed, however, is to consistently transmit what we have learned to other and younger women and to build alliances to countervail the forces opposed to gender justice. ■