

Media obscures women's voices

Mainstream press covering the Huairou Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women concentrate mostly on the way the Chinese government is handling the event.

BY JENNIFER DITCHBURN
& CAROL MCQUEEN

The few instances of surveillance in which a relatively small number of women were filmed by Chinese security video cameras have received widespread media attention.

Although these issues are important, they have been sensationalized to the point that the women who worked so hard to get to China are drowned out or silenced.

The women's conference is about empowerment and sharing that empowerment with everyone left at home. Newspapers and television should carry this message instead of the Chinese government.

Here is an idea of what the NGO Forum is like from the inside.

From nine in the morning until seven in the evening, women attend workshops on environmental destruction, economic globalization, women and human rights abuse, peace and human security, and the presence of women in politics, to name just a few.

Although Chinese security is sometimes an inconvenience, participants are not deterred in their determination to speak out, to protest and to convince governments around the world that their voices should and must be heard.

With the assistance of friendly Chinese translators, women navigate the maze of tents, kiosks and buildings at the outdoor Huairou venue to find the session they wish to attend. They help each other with simultaneous translation and share ideas from different corners of the globe.

Women hang posters advertising workshops on female circumcision, domestic violence and the empowerment of women on any available wall. Black women from the United States who have never met hug each other as sisters.

Women from Nigeria, the Netherlands and Brazil share the same quiet moment of meditation in the colourful Tibetan tent. Indian food is available in the South-Asian tent for anyone who passes through.

Information pamphlets from NGOs around the world are found in the Global Tent where conference-goers often eat lunches of Chinese noodles. Colours abound, as fabric from Africa, India and Latin America blend in vibrant patterns.

In the evenings, cultural ceremonies bring women together once again as various countries celebrate their national heritage.

The success of the NGO Forum and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in improving the condition of women worldwide is dependent upon their voices being heard. It is time the press allows this to happen.

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Women build bridges using the Internet in Beijing

Association for Progressive Communications provides support

BY JENNIFER DITCHBURN

A group of Argentinean women are crammed together in front of a computer terminal at the conference press centre. They're collaborating on a story for a paper back home in Buenos Aires, and in minutes it will have arrived there via the Internet.

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) has become an important presence here at the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum on Women.

Women from around the world are discovering they can send messages home at no cost, and can access information about the conference and NGOs from the World Wide Web.

Non-governmental organizations are linked through the APC network at a minimal monthly cost, enabling them to establish contacts and exchange information.

Trading e-mail addresses is a common exercise between women here at the con-

ference. For example, Russian women are connected via GlasNet, and Angolans via AngoNet.

The Internet initiative in Beijing was organized by 40 women from various countries associated with APC. Regina Cammy Shakakata of Zambia is one of those women, providing technical support to delegates who may never have used a computer in their lives.

Shakakata organizes Internet access for the faculty of medicine library at the University of Zambia. Zambia is connected to the information highway through ZamNet, which went on-line last December.

Zambian doctors and academics frequently use the Internet service, and Shakakata says women's NGOs in the country are now jumping abroad.

"Before, Zambian women didn't know who to talk to on the Internet," she says. "Then we first spoke to APC and realized there was a whole world of women to talk to."

Young women fight for change

A bright half-moon hangs over the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum site in China. On a small stage, an all-female band from France is sending an acid-jazz tune into the warm night air. The lyrics are Arabic and the singer's voice is sensual and sultry. In front, young women from all over the world dance; Indian saris bristle, sandals tread softly.

BY CAROL MCQUEEN

The number of young women at the conference is impressive.

Coming to China was no easy task. Though visas were difficult to obtain, the major obstacle to attending the NGO Forum and the United Nations World Conference on Women was the amount of money needed to finance such a trip. Government-controlled hotel accommodations are prohibitively expensive.

The presence of so many young women here indicates their commitment to change and to the advancement of women in their respective countries, as well as a dedication to enhancing the credibility of youth worldwide.

Pat Payne sits on her huge camera container as there are no other free seats on the shuttle bus returning to Beijing after the first day of the conference.

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Although it's dark and rainy outside, her enthusiasm is soaring. A masters student in multimedia installations performance at the University of California at San Diego, she wants to create a multimedia project based on her experiences at Huairou.

But, as a member of the Coalition of Women of Colour, her priority is the empowerment of her community in the United States.

"There is going to be a Republican convention in San Diego when I get back. I need to find some kind of strategy to be able to mobilize people, women and artists especially, against this growing conservatism," she said.

She is worried that women of colour are not aware of their place in history, a phenomenon which contributes to their lack of empowerment. Payne argues that California's unfair legal system perpetuates this situation.

Proposition 187, recently passed by the California legislature, denies children of illegal immigrants access to health care and education.

However, according to Payne, the state's prosperity is dependent upon a domestic and agricultural workforce made up of illegal aliens.

Payne also fears that California's repeal of affirmative action legislation will greatly reduce the number of women of colour who attend university. "Universities will now become predominantly white and

Asian. We'll see a lot less female faces in university," she said.

Although Kalyani lives halfway around the world in India, she too is concerned with access to education for females in her country.

"Lots of girls have to give up their education in my country," she said. "They are expected to look after their siblings at home."

In fact, for every two and a half hours a boy between the ages of six and nine spends reading in India, a girl the same age will look at her books for less than half an hour. Yet, she spends twice as much time as a boy doing household chores.

According to Kalyani, a young social worker, the resultant lack of education prevents women from escaping a caste system which treats them like property to be sold to a future spouse.

"Girls always grow up with the feeling that they are someone else's property," she said. Kalyani also pointed out that girls, even if they do go to school, receive absolutely no education about their bodies, thus preventing them from caring adequately for themselves.

Naveline Maria Baromeo from the Dutch Antilles island of Curacao wants to impart a new self-image to the young women of her country.

As a single mother who left her husband and returned to school despite the resistance of her society, she deplors the machismo that dominates in her country.

"Men decide everything in my country...they obtain the best jobs and make a lot of money in the system," Baromeo said. "Girls don't even possess the power to make their own decisions."

Baromeo hopes that, based upon what she has learned at the conference, she can teach the young women of her country to be strong and say, "No, I want to study, to have a good job and to be able to take care of myself."

Equal access to the economy and to education is what preoccupies Sadeka Hedaraly most. As the special assistant to the Conseil Permanent de la Jeunesse in Quebec, it is her job to accumulate ideas from other countries that will best ensure the advancement of Quebec women.

Hedaraly believes that a woman's right to enter the workforce without discrimination has not been ensured.

"New social welfare programs that facilitate the possibility for women both to have children and work outside the home need to be created," she said, adding that properly subsidized daycare would be a start.

Hedaraly is anxious to learn from the Nordic countries which she believes have implemented successful policies enabling women to reach the highest spheres of power and decision-making.

Sascha Kranendonk, a young Dutch woman working in Germany, feels that women in her country must use their growing political influence to increase awareness about environmental degradation.

As a volunteer for Women in Europe for a Common Future, which brings together several environmental groups in Europe, she disseminates information about the effects of toxic and nuclear waste on women and children's health.

A woman's right to enter the workforce without discrimination has not been ensured.

"Women must become active together because governments are not doing anything," she said. Kranendonk also argues that women, who are responsible for 80 per cent of food purchases in Europe, must attempt to limit the North's over-consumption.

Although Japanese women, like their European counterparts, are amongst the best educated in the world, they have not yet attained political power. The percentage of elected positions they hold is only 2.7 per cent compared to 39.4 per cent in Norway, a statistic Eriko Innami laments.

"Women's status is still very low. We are a developed nation. We

by Jennifer Ditchburn and Carol McQueen at the Fourth United Nations Women's Conference in Huairou, China
(Canadian University Press)

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have all the education. Why are we so behind?" questions the 26-year-old representative for the Japanese Girl Guides.

She blames her country's school system for not providing any gender education and perpetuating low self-esteem amongst women.

Although these women span the globe geographically and come from different cultural backgrounds, they all share the same thirst for change.

Having participated actively at the NGO Forum, they are concerned that their voice will not be heard at the actual UN conference where an official action plan is being formulated.

"No youth were included in the Japanese government delegation," Innami said. "I'm also not sure if the UN is very supportive of us. Very few young people are accredited to the conference."

Hedaraly agrees. She says that young women are not granted the credibility they deserve. Often they have not yet attained the positions of prestige that would enable them to access the conference.

Regardless, these young women will return to their respective communities empowered and refreshed. They are determined to be leaders and to enact changes on behalf of other women.

For, as Hedaraly confirmed: "The young women of today are the people who are going to be the leaders of tomorrow."