

On November 8, my colleague spoke of the tremendous achievements made at the conference in bringing to world attention the plight of the girl child. I will highlight some of the other issues addressed, and Canada's leadership role in moving some of them forward.

Some of the Western media reports claimed that there was a sense at the conference of preaching to the converted. However, when you consider that many women came from countries where they have no legal rights toward their own children, let alone any property or inheritance rights, it is easier to see what an achievement it was for many just to be there. In a setting where political dissent of any kind is not tolerated, it was impressive to see women demanding social, economic and political change.

To draw the contrast more sharply, I refer to a story reported by CTV's Diana Bishop on what it means to lose face in China. As in many Eastern cultures, it is imperative that one not be embarrassed in public. Great pains are taken to ensure that this does not happen. In China, if a woman causes a man to lose face, her punishment is to be permanently disfigured by having sulphuric acid thrown in her face. Upon hearing about this, the only remote Western parallel I could think of might be the 17th century custom of forcing adulterous women to wear the letter "A" to remind the public of their transgression. This gives you some idea, honourable senators, of how far Chinese women have to go before they achieve real equality.

That the conference went forward at all may have served to open the eyes of Chinese authorities, and perhaps provided some measure of hope, not only to Chinese women but to all those in that country who are struggling for human rights, and the world acceptance that comes with respecting those rights.

In China, even informal women's groups are subject to surveillance. That applied to us, as well. We had to show our hotel registration cards every time we entered the elevator, and no visitors were allowed in the hotel rooms. If they saw a "Do Not Disturb" sign on a door, they would ask why. There was a real concern among the Chinese security officials that we would engage in subversive activities.

Between August 30 and September 15, there were over 30,000 women in Beijing and Huairou attending the NGO forum and the UN conference. Of these, 17,000 registered delegates from 189 countries participated in the conference, making it the largest UN conference ever held.

The official government delegation was made up of parliamentarians, federal officials, and representatives from provincial and territorial governments, youth, labour, business, churches, academia, and non-governmental organizations.

Five hundred Canadians participated in the NGO forum. They brought with them the experience of their local realities, and kept

the discussion of issues grounded in the real and the possible. Now, NGOs have another role to play: Holding governments accountable for implementing the agreements reached, and for ensuring that cultural excuses do not stand in the way of women's equality rights.

As Suzanne Mubarek, the first lady of Egypt, so eloquently put it:

We are not here so that some of us may impose certain values or beliefs, which others may consider to be against their religion or their morals. If you have the right to believe in what I reject, I also have the right to reject what you believe in, or believe in what you reject. Without this type of understanding, relationships would be based on oppression and submission, and not on equality or justice.

During the course of the 10 days we were there, we met with the All China Lawyers Association — the equivalent of the Canadian Bar Association — the Chinese Ministry of Health, the All China Women's Federation and many others, including Ken Sundquist, the *chargé d'affaires* and Acting Canadian Ambassador in Beijing.

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As parliamentarians, we held private meetings with our Chinese counterparts. The Chinese cabinet includes three women ministers out of a total of 32, all three of whom were part of the official Chinese delegation. It became obvious very soon that they were not speaking for themselves as women but more as representatives of the state.

We also met with the Chinese YMCA and YWCA. Although it has been around for most of this century in China, the "Y" had to go underground during the cultural revolution and has been active again only since 1980. It now has over 700,000 members in Shanghai alone.

The "Y" is neither independent nor autonomous. Like all women's groups in China, it is closely affiliated with the government-run All China Women's Federation. The federation is governed by a national congress of Chinese women that meets every five years to decide policy. In reality, the congress merely acts to publicly affirm policies already decided upon at the top levels of the Communist Party and of the government.

Through the course of previous UN preparatory meetings, 12 areas emerged as primary considerations for the future of women in the world: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic structures, power sharing and decision-making mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, human rights, the media, the environment, and the situation of the girl child. I will not go into detail on all of these issues today, but I would like to touch on a few.