

Beijing 1995 - a milestone

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was the largest gathering of women in history: 40,000, with the greatest number assembled for the NGO forum, "Look at the World through Women's Eyes". The media gave little coverage to non-governmental events, sticking mainly to the official conference.

Using UN regional opportunities, thousands of NGO women helped to draft the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. Implementation at every level would contribute to women's peace-building capacities. UNESCO takes it as its chief reference tool in its Women and the Culture of Peace program and it is the tool used in measuring implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Interested parties now seem to share some core assumptions about world security:

- Military "addiction" is detrimental to security.
- Women are excluded from decision-making.
- The UN conferences have helped the global women's movement where the security challenge is an integral part.

But five years after Beijing, resources for implementation are slim everywhere. A new NGO voice, the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), a 40-member coalition of which VOW is a part, published a stinging critique of Canada's failure to live up to even a fraction of the strategies to which commitments were made in Beijing. The conclusion was that Canada has not promoted women's equality and does not take seriously the links between gender, poverty, health and the environment, between violence and inequality, between democratic participation and good decision-making. Only Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario bothered to complete a UN-based questionnaire (on one page) on the implementation of the Platform for Action. By default, the Federal government came up with the answers.

Women, sustainable peace and the Security Council

Although women have secured places at the peace table in conflicted countries – South Africa, Burundi, Guatemala, Cambodia, Liberia, Israel, and Northern Ireland – exclusion is the norm. Given the opportunity, women are the main proponents of agendas that include women and children and deal with housing, education, and child care. They advocate strategies and programs to benefit both women and society at large. They alter the understanding of roles women can play. During preparations for this year's celebrations of International Women's Day at the UN in New York, the President of the Security Council for the month of March, A.K. Chowdhury of Bangladesh, gave delegates his presidential statement about the valued role of women in peace making and peace building and hinted that further affirmative steps by the Security Council were possible.