

Sharon Venne, a lawyer and human rights activist, spoke about the challenges facing Indigenous women. She pointed out that for Indigenous women, the struggle is not for gender equity; the struggle is one of being recognized as a human being with rights like all human beings. The struggle for Indigenous Peoples has been against always being asked to move aside for development.

Indigenous Peoples have been working at the UN on a Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples since 1982. However, Canada, the US, New Zealand and Australia have blocked the Declaration because of provisions indicating that all peoples (including Indigenous Peoples) have the right to self-determination. Furthermore Canada has been opposing the interpretation that “peoples” refers to Indigenous Peoples, thereby recognizing their right to self-determination in Article 1, *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

Currently the Human Genome Diversity Project is undertaking to collect the genes of Indigenous Peoples. In light of the prediction that 722 Indigenous Peoples will be extinct in 75 to 125 years, this \$7 billion project is attempting to patent Indigenous Peoples’ genetic information.

Ms. Venne pointed out the need for the feminist movement to stop perpetuating the existing power structures of the industrialized countries and to begin an open dialogue on the different cultural perceptions inherent in Indigenous women and women of colour and their right to determine for themselves their political status, and economic and social development needs. (Appendix 3 is a copy of a document some Indigenous women circulated at Beijing.)

Amal Ghazal, a Muslim graduate student from Lebanon, indicated that one of the challenges facing Muslim women in the Middle East is the stereotypes about Muslim women which increase the gap between Muslim and other women. She pointed out that Islamic “revivalism” has given more space to women and has been a motivating factor. Ghazal pointed out, however, that women don’t know their rights and that in some instances they suffer from inadequate laws (colonial laws which have not been updated and a lack of Muslim laws). Muslim women suffer from “twisted” and “distorted” Islam (e.g., recent events in Afghanistan) and “cultural” Islam (e.g., Saudi Arabia). Western feminists must recognize that a woman can be a strong feminist with her veil. The veil can be chosen, not imposed or oppressive. Muslim women have been misunderstood and underestimated by western feminists.

Delmy Garcia outlined the position of El Salvadorian women. Women are taught to be submissive, to obey men and to look after children. The Roman Catholic Church has much influence; women do not use birth control and have many children. Few girls finish post-secondary education and few women are in professions—they may be maids, vendors or factory workers. Parents must pay for education so it is difficult for poor families to educate their children. Women work for basic survival. There are no social services and land where people have been repatriated after the civil war is poor. Violence against women is an issue; women stay in abusive situations because they do not have economic alternatives. During the civil war, men and women worked together. Women exchanged their skirts for pants, purses for backpacks, shoes for books and sang songs of justice. This experience has opened a larger role for women in society.

