

## U.N. CONFERENCE

Continued from page 15

An estimated 4,000 observers from the NGO forum—including Tinker—participated in the conference in an effort to shape the final platform. She and lesbian activists from several countries were part of a Lesbian Caucus, including representatives from 30 accredited organizations, that weighed in with a list of demands. The cardinal tenet of the caucus' list was that all women—regardless of sexual orientation—have an inalienable claim to human rights guarantees and protections.

The phrase "sexual orientation" was included in brackets in the draft platform; the brackets indicated that some delegations objected to the text. The U.S. delegation was reportedly the first to



Palesa Beverley Ditsie  
of South Africa

propose removing the brackets—a move which caused a stir among opposing delegations. According to media reports, Geraldine Ferraro, head of the Human Rights section of the U.S. delegation, was "literally booed by some of the other countries" for her suggestion that the brackets be removed.

Lesbian rights activists also deemed "the right to determine one's sexual identity; the right to control one's own body, particularly in establishing intimate relationships...; [and] the right to choose if, when, and with whom to bear or raise children as fundamental components of the human rights of all women, regardless of sexual orientation."

*"At the last World Conference on Women 10 years ago, only one country—The Netherlands—spoke out in favor of lesbians, and at this conference more than 30 countries have done so," says Rachel Rosenbloom of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.*

"Lesbians were out there fighting for reproductive and birth control rights, but they were also letting others know that women could actually enjoy their sexuality and have pleasure for pleasure's sake. That was very exciting to me," says 21-year-old Sabrina Godfrey, a student at Lewis & Clark College in Portland. Godfrey, who is a lesbian, attended the NGO forum.

"I think perhaps the most important thing about the forum is that it is so grass roots oriented," she says. "Women were able to talk with each other on a one-to-one basis. They have made connections and have had experiences they will remember their whole lives."

Portland resident Isabel Villar, who was born and raised in Chile, agrees: "The thought of being with thousands of women from around the world at the largest gathering of women anywhere, to me that was incredible."

The 52-year-old Villar, who is a lesbian but



doesn't consider herself a political activist, says many of the stories she heard moved her with emotional ferocity.

"I went to one workshop talking about how [Burmese women] are being forced into prostitution. Poverty in that country is very bad, and women are being tricked into going to Thailand by people who say there are good jobs there," says Villar. "The women would go, and there would be no high-paying jobs. Instead they would be taken away, put into places surrounded by barbed wire, and made into prostitutes. It's so painful to hear these stories, but the women's courage to speak out is astounding. It inspires so much."

Lesbian and bisexual women were speaking out in a variety of ways. For instance, for the first time at an NGO forum an official Lesbian Tent was included among several diversity



Theresa Enrico of Portland

(Above) Women at the plenary session of the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

tents. The tent served as a center for lesbian networking, information and activities.

"It was incredible to see lesbians from around the world who gathered at the tent," says Godfrey. "How many times do we get an opportunity like that?" Lesbians also held a march through the forum site that included 500 participants from 30 countries. According to wire reports, marchers chanted "Lesbian rights are human rights" and "Liberté, égalité, homosexualité." They also read their list of conference demands.

Before the lesbian march a group of Muslim women protested homosexuality and adultery, and throughout the U.N. conference some participants—particularly Islamic and Christian fundamentalists—expressed their opposition to extending human rights protections to lesbians. Despite the opposition, Tinker says, bridges were built.

"There had supposedly been an incident where two lesbians stood in front of Muslim women and kissed. Apparently they felt the lesbians had been deliberately antagonistic," she says. "I don't know if that was the case, but I wanted them to know that this [alleged attitude] didn't represent the views of the Lesbian Caucus."

Tinker jumped at an opportunity to speak before a group of Muslim women. As she had done throughout the conference, she talked about the ways that children of lesbian and gay parents are affected by sexual orientation discrimination, particularly by educational systems that refuse to recognize and respect their families; marriage laws



Bella Abzug waits outside the U.N. security office as two Canadian lesbian demonstrators are questioned

that discriminate against lesbian and gay families by denying them legal protection and social recognition; and employment laws that permit discrimination.

"I told them about my family, about my grandchild," she says. "They were silent initially but later asked questions. Some were curious as to how lesbians could have children, and one woman wanted to know how I could go against God. I said I was a Christian and God wanted me to be a lesbian. She would [repeatedly] ask, 'This is what God wants? God wants this?' She finally said, 'Oh, this is your religion.' It seemed like she could accept [my lesbianism] when it was cast as my religious convictions. It was very interesting."

Tinker adds: "After that dialogue, when I would

Continued on page 19