

WOMEN'S INEQUITIES GLOBAL

BY NORA O. WILDE

The United Nations has scheduled a World Conference for Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995. This official governmental conference is being held to assess the changes in the ten years since the end of the U.N. Decade for Women, 1976-1985.

Earlier optimism about improving lives of women worldwide has given way to the realization that change does not equate with progress, that equal laws do not translate into equal treatment.

Documents adopted by the three women's conferences (in Mexico City in 1976, in Copenhagen in 1980, and in Nairobi in 1985) provide a comprehensive list of issues that cause or perpetuate women's unequal access to resources, services and jobs. The Beijing conference is charged with identifying the major obstacles to women's advancement.

Recognizing women's problems was a necessary first step; many early development programs ignored or undercut women's needs because the extent of women's contribution to their countries' economies remained invisible due to work definitions and perceptions.

Research has now documented women's multi-faceted activities; donor agencies, governments and non-governmental organizations have introduced programs designed to ameliorate the lives of poor women in both rural and urban areas. Like all development programs, mistakes are easier to present than successes. Further, trying to solve all women's problems at once deflects the impact and defuses accountability.

Clearly the 1995 conference requires a new approach. Yet the protocol that proceeds international conferences is difficult to change, its steps obscure and are etched in tradition.

Preparatory conferences set up by the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women and attended by all interested governments and by non-government organizations add issues and sharpen views. Meetings of the five regional commissions (Latin America, West Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and Europe) add their concerns. Consensus is more easily reached by expanding the lists of problems and issues rather than electing priorities that each government would then be expected to implement.

A new approach is more likely to come from the global women's movement. It was the Second Wave that pressured for the first conference and that prompted governments and international agencies to adopt programs that responded to women as well as to men or to children.

This new approach calls for women to meet in conferences, seminars, or working groups to discuss women's conditions worldwide. The goal of each meeting is to identify a handful of critical issues that can be easily explained and understood; that have important ripple effects; and that can be monitored effectively.

The U.S. Council for INSTRAW, the U.N. International Research and Training Institute for the



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Advancement of Women, is promoting such conferences throughout the United States.

Each local conference will have its own character and focus, but each will produce a series of priorities. In each locale, other organizations will become part of the organizing committee.

The intent is to broaden the audience so that women's issues are widely discussed and all the U.N. agencies for women become better known. The expectation is that as more conferences are held, the media will begin to report on women's efforts to improve women's lives around the world.

Two conferences were held in June. The West Virginia University Center for Women's Studies conference had six other co-sponsors. Discussion focused on the single topic of "Women and the West Virginia Economy: State and International Perspectives." Better information on jobs and job training, data disaggregated by gender and more women on policy boards were among the priorities defined.

The Bay Area Forum and Fair held at the University of California, Berkeley, sought to emulate the U.N. world conferences by intermixing discussion with songs, dances and exhibitions of art and organizations.

Coordinators of the ten working groups had been meeting for months to produce background materials and to select themes.

The proposed priorities illustrate the difficulty in framing issues in the form of a policy or program that can be acted on. Subsequent conferences will no doubt refine these ideas as well as add their own perspectives to *Priorities 95*.

Policies and programs identified by the *Priorities 95* conferences in the U.S. will be collected for distribution around the country and at the international *Priorities 95* workshops in Beijing. But taking the *Priorities 95* to Beijing is not the ultimate goal. The U.N. itself has no implementing power; rather it tries to inform and influence governments, organizations and the media.

While the official governmental conference and the NGO Forum in Beijing provide opportunities for activist women from around the world to meet each other and exchange ideas and to dramatize events for the media, the institutions with power to introduce new policies or to fund new programs are largely governmental.

Thus, at each level -- local, national and international -- the constituency for *Priorities 95* are three:

- Women's groups who can use the ideas to focus on their own work;
- Governments who might be convinced to carry out these priority programs or institute these policies;
- The media which can educate the general population about issues concerning women and how to address them.

Highlights of *Priorities 95* are:

Violence: Women's rights must be recognized as human rights. Rape as a weapon of war should be declared an international war crime. The U.N. should establish international safe havens for women abused in war or by governments.

Health: Pregnancy should be elevated to a community service equivalent to jury or army service. Health needs of women must be met in each of the life cycle stages.

Reproductive: Self-determination must be guaranteed.

Education: All 7-year-old girls should be in school by the year 2000. An awareness action guide to educate and empower girls will be developed and field tested in the U.S.

and abroad. Once perfected, this guide should be widely adopted.

Environment: The industrialized north must accept the environmental consequences of their consumer policy.

Gender impact statements: Should be an integral part of all policies, programs and activities undertaken in the implementation of Agenda 21 passed at the U.N. conference.

Politics: Women should be eligible to run for elected office at all levels of government from national to community. Women's government and U.N. positions must increase. Supporting women's non-governmental groups is essential for empowerment.

Work: Minimum wage should be related to the market to provide a livelihood. Prostitution should be decriminalized.

Media: Lists of women experts should be provided to radio and TV. Media should be encouraged to increase women's representation to 50%. Women should be trained in all facets of broadcasting and filming.

Housing: Women should have rights to own a house and the land under it, and have first call on any government subsidized housing. Alternative types of housing must be encouraged to allow innovative and affordable facilities for women with children and women living alone at any age.

Refugees: Gender persecution should qualify a woman as a refugee. Refugee camps need to provide protection for women alone.

Grassroots: Women organizing need access to information. Issues of difference within each country must be recognized in policies and programs.

Persons to contact for *Priorities 95* conferences scheduled for 1994 include:

January 29: Lisa Griffin -- Society for International Development, Women in Development at American University, New York City, N.Y. (202) 737-5478.

March 8: Mariam Chamberlain -- National Council for Research on Women, Bay Area-II, S.F., Calif. (212) 274-0730.

March 8: Sherry Keith -- San Francisco State University (510) 548-8340; Elsa Chaney -- University of Iowa (319) 335-0368.

April: Jane Jaquette -- Occidental College, Los Angeles (310) 828-5849.

Persons to contact for *Project 95* conferences still in planning stages are: Mary Chen -- Boston (617) 495-0797; Kathy Jones -- Bunting Institute San Diego, San Diego State University (619) 594-6524; Avonne Fraser -- Minnesota (612) 625-2505; Nancy Lewis -- Humphrey Institute Hawaii, University of Hawaii, Manoa (808) 956-8465; and Lisa Prugi -- Miami, Florida State University (305) 534-6687.

This article has been reprinted from NOW NEWS, which is published by the Bend, Ore., chapter of the National Organization for Women. Nora Wilde is a member of the news staff.

MORE IN 94

In spite of the political conservatives' (read pundits) eagerness to write an obituary for the women's political movement, 1994's signs are suggesting just the opposite: that '94 might be an even stronger year for statewide women candidates than 1992. Predictably, the (male) pundits would rather ignore women's increasing political strength, so don't expect to read this story in the mainstream press.

If 1992 was the "Year of the Woman," the hoopla was mostly around Congressional races, where the net gains were dramatic (200% in the Senate and 68% in the House), but the small (4 seats in the Senate and 18 in the House). Although women gained in state legislatures and statewide elected offices, those gains were less dramatic and absent at the gubernatorial level.

After the '92 elections, leaders of the women's political movement were quick to caution against excessive optimism for '94. They stressed that the Congressional gains were almost entirely in open seats (3 or 4 in the Senate and 21 or 24 in the House), which were unusually plentiful because of redistricting and the House banking scandal. Feminist leaders make their top priority the reelection of the 1992 winners and hope that continued hard work might produce a few more governorships.

But at this point in '94 the prospects for women statewide candidates are significantly better than was foreseen a year ago. The principle reason is that three times the number of women are running this cycle than in '92.

Conscious of the lessons of '92, women are focusing particularly on open seats. In fact, women are potential contenders in almost every open race, except for governors' races in the South.

This level of competitiveness represents a significant gain over '92. In Senate races that year, women competed for 5 or 8 open seats, winning 3; in gubernatorial races, women competed for only 2 of 8 open seats, winning none. Clearly, the high number of opportunities is likely to produce additional victories.

In addition, women are strong challengers in a number of races. Strong gubernatorial challengers include Kathleen Brown (D-Calif.), Dawn Clark Netsch (D-Ill.), Bonnie Campbell (D-Iowa), Debbie Stabenow (D-Minn), and Jan Laverty Jones (D-Nev). Senate challengers are led by Linda Kushner (D-R.I.).

Finally, women's political giving continues to rise. EMILY's List, for example, has already raised \$1.2 million. At this point in the previous cycle, EMILY hadn't even begun raising money for candidates.

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