

DAWN INFORMS

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era



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From the conference room and the corridors

BEIJING+5 NEGOTIATIONS: Serious Risks and Disturbing Repetitions

The meeting of the Preparatory Committee for Beijing+5 ended on March 17, 2000 with its agenda still unfinished. The negotiations during the preceding two weeks were painfully slow and subject to endless delays and delaying tactics. While a small minority within the Group of 77 dragged their heels on women's rights, some Northern delegations were, as usual, hard on the economic issues. The tendency of some governments, during the conferences of the 1990s, to hold progress towards women's rights and gender equality hostage to traditional South - North battles over resources was evident yet again. This time around, this problem was compounded by inexperienced chairing of many key sessions, and apparently inadequate technical support from the Conference Secretariat for the negotiations. Having participated in a decade of UN negotiations of difficult and contentious issues, the inability to move the negotiations forward was painfully obvious.

In the meantime on the NGO side, the subterranean corridors of the UN suddenly saw an influx of Franciscan and Dominican priests in full robes, nuns, and large numbers of other (mostly) North Americans wearing blue buttons that said only "The Family". Rumor had it that most of them (over 350) had been registered by only a handful (less than 10) of North American conservative organisations. Their sudden interest in the Beijing+5 negotiations would have been touching if some of them had shown any concern for or interest in women's rights.

This was hardly to be expected, however, since many seemed to be quite ignorant of what had happened at Beijing. One of DAWN's team, for instance, was startled when she was asked naively by one of the 'Family button people' what the PFA stood for on her badge which said "I support the PFA"! When asked if she had ever heard of the Beijing Platform for Action, she said she hadn't! These bumbling conservative storm-troopers would have been amusing if they had not also resorted to more intimidating tactics.

What was going on?

Condemned to Sisyphean Action?

In some ways, the slowness of the negotiations at this stage is nothing new. For those of us who have been participating in the conferences of the 1990s, there are at least two precedents for the current situation.

In March 1995, the final Prepcom before Beijing was in disarray. By its end, the conference rooms were empty and women activists were roaming the corridors in distress. Meanwhile the draft text being negotiated - what was finally completed as the Beijing Platform for Action - was bristling with square brackets, including on the term [gender]! Nevertheless, the negotiations were resumed and the text of the PFA negotiated. However, differently from March 1995, we do not have five months until September to restore sanity to the current process. Between now and the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) in early June, there are less than 70 days.

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CB5/3/350

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