

At Beijing Conference, Women Target Economic Injustice

 Imagine 30,000 women walking around a rainy, muddy 17-hectare site, trying to find the place that holds the one presentation they have chosen to attend out of a possible 50 events. Imagine that they have been bused in, or walked from, any one of 50 hotels and dormitories within a 64-kilometer diameter. Imagine the number of languages, races, ethnic groups, religions, personalities, classes, and dispositions that swirled and circled and settled throughout the days, as women found ways to talk and listen each other; or to persuade; or just to get out of the rain. What are the chances that they would ever agree on anything?

Pretty high, if you're talking about economic policy. Amidst all the differences, in panel after panel, the women in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women made one thing clear: economic reform policies specifically, and economic globalization generally, are having a devastating impact on women in both the North and the South.

And then, being action-oriented, they made another thing clear. Women around the world are organizing to move beyond surviving the devastation to reversing it, teaching themselves and one another about the policies that threaten them, learning and using new advocacy skills, rethinking the fundamentals of economic theory, and working to bridge the gap between what in fact happens to them and what they want to have happen.

Women are pitted against their governments in these en-

deavors, however, despite the universal rhetoric about the importance of women's economic empowerment and integration into economic decisionmaking. In every regional NGO meeting leading to Beijing, as well as scores of panels and workshops held during the parallel NGO Forum in the town on Huairou, participants identified globalization and structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as a major threat to women's well-being and economic rights.

And yet the final Platform makes virtually no mention of these issues. Their absence led the NGO Economic Justice Caucus to charge their governments with actively refusing to deal with the root causes of women's poverty and marginalization. The United States and the European Union led the pack by refusing to allow language and analysis in the Platform that links their economic policies to poverty, leaving the conferees with a document that is self-contradictory and lacking coherent economic analysis.

The Caucus also rejected governmental claims, inherent and explicit, that resources are too scarce to increase social investment and bring about a transformation to a more equitable economic system. The Caucus called for a shift from military to social spending, and multilateral debt relief for the poorest countries to free up funds for social investment. It also rejected the oft-repeated claim that "there is no alternative" to current economic policies.

At the NGO Forum, women called for alternative trade prac-

tices based on fair exchange, social and economic investment policies that increase women's control over and access to resources, tax and investment policies that bring about an equitable distribution of resources, gender analysis as a basis of economic policy, and national accounting systems that count women's paid and unpaid work.

The World Bank descended on Beijing with a high-level PR blitz, aimed at making the Bank look downright gender-sensitive. Even its need to look like one of the "gender good guys", however, couldn't entice it to acknowledge women's negative experience with SAPs. Against extensive evidence to the contrary presented by the women at the Conference, the Bank insisted during one of its press conferences that SAPs help women in the long run.

The big lesson of Beijing is this: governments and multilateral development banks, rather than following up on their rhetoric with support for women's participation in economic decision-making, have actively shut women out of economic policy-making. Equally clear from Beijing was the growing sense that women, invited or not, will hold their governments and the international financial and trade institutions accountable to women's needs and priorities. ■

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