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Women's Conference – Journeys

What have we not done? Where have we gone wrong?

CONGO - PRESENTATION

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This is an unexpected privilege and I want to thank Afaf Mahfouz, Sudha Acharya, Pam Rajput and other associates in the planning committee for this honour.

I do not know whether I should feel guilty or pleased to say that I have been a participant in the Ngo forums at all the four world womens conferences, starting from Mexico. You might well ask, so what have you done for the masses by attending these global conferences?and should you not have rotated the opportunity so that others could have had the benefit? These are serious political questions which I think we need to address as we go on what I call the womens conference journey.

And I will come to that soon

The atmosphere in Mexico was one of exuberance, jubilation that such an event was possible at all - 10,000 women gathered in the NGO forum from all over the world, listening to serious speeches by world renowned economists such as Esther Boserup. There were strong voices against the South African apartheid regime, and in support of the liberation of Palestine.

In a word the conference was political and ventilated , there was a sense of fluidity freedom and flexibility between groups as well as between government and non government activities =.there was space for innovation and invention. Mildred Persinger is here and can testify to the amazing things we did like bring back the list of registered participants, so that we may keep alive that gathering ; it is this list that led the way to the ivy tribune ;and Remember we had no computers then nor fax nor email. Mexico gave a big push and perhaps even gave shape, if not birth to what can be called the worldwide women's movement. (WWWM), which while we enjoy, we also deny with our overactive minds, and strong desire to emphasize difference , and diversity.

The lessons learnt in Mexico of the issues which women would like to further understand and move forward was experienced in Copenhagen which turned out to be a far more substantial meeting, more like a conference of specialists, than any of the meetings since then.

The Nairobi conference was a great leap forward for building women's networks, subject specific / or across regions . Thus was born, what I would like to caricature as the the new men's club of women:, women who organised, networked, wielded power in international debates, challenged inherited knowledge bases; a critical mass which laid the basis for women's international advocacy..

Between Nairobi 1985 and the Beijing Women's Conference 1995,I think a different ethos emerged. To some extent, it could be called the bureaucratisation of the women's movement and to some extent, it could also be said that women were beginning to be able to give what can be called women's advise on major global issues such as environment, human rights, habitat, population and so forth. One could say that women have journeyed from a sense of strengthening what can be called a broad based women's identity to developing consensual approaches to what can be called general policies such as economics, population and then moved ahead to intervene and sometimes even break up some of the earlier traditional political configurations within the U.N., as the radical edge.

If I was to do a balance sheet , I would say that the most significant achievement has been the education of the State - and the judiciary.. A remarkable graphic of this is a huge half page advertisement placed by the women and child department of the government of India, in a national newspaper on May 28th, showing the face of a battered bruised woman, and making an appeal(-when you do this to your wife, think of your sister mother daughter

)showing the governments willingness to admit, the existence of this highly sensitive issue of domestic violence - men's rage over women.

Some years ago - may be 10+ years ago, it would be unthinkable that a government will expose anything within the sacrosanct family. It was always either the rhetoric men and women, 'shoulder to shoulder' or don't destroy the harmony within the family'. Issues such as trafficking in women, brought up by Asian women as far back as in Nairobi have now been adopted by the governments as priority issues for redressal, as has violence.

A second achievement, is the increase in the visibility of women - whether in their misery or in achievement. The identity, the woman question, the difference has been established.

At the world level, these conferences, and women participation in them has offered crucial handles, to redress cruel customs, laws, systems of exclusion especially in many conservative countries - The usual gain of exchange, competitiveness, external triggers has evened out the sharp wounds in specific cultural identities

However these are intangibles - however basic. It is also true that none of these advances has reduced the misery, or redressed the exclusions and oppressions endured by women. In fact data - world wide shows that there is an increase in domestic violence against women e.g. in India, higher and more virulent dowry demands and of course a wider spreading of female foeticide. Yesterday at the Press conference Angela King gave vivid statistics of this situation world wide, and the really deprived situation of women relative to men. She and others also drew attention to the improvements in women's lives, and referred to the Women 2000 publication. I have been through this publication. The advances are segmented and highly sectional and minimal. The masses of girls, women and female children, world wide are under assault.

SO then what have we not done? Where have we gone wrong ?

In my view one of our shortcomings is that the WWWM has also entered the conventional mode of functioning: where government is postulated as the main player in transformation, in drawing up national and international initiatives, and the women's movement a reporter of progress, a monitor, a This is a very conventional relationship - it also diminishes responsibility.

We hear more often these days that there is no women's movement, no united social flow - towards a purpose - only a large, scattered, diverse set of women focussed organisations. From the earlier 70's when national initiatives for women were in the hands of women, as in Mexico where we gave birth to our selves, today national initiatives are in the hands of government - a slide back.

We do not see those strong alliances between mass based struggles for justice and the women's agenda. In India for example, mass based struggles, like the anti-arrack (native alcohol) in Andhra have not necessarily been adopted by what can be called a national women's movement.

Today economic reform programmes, as the structural adjustment policies are euphemistically called, are attacking the worker movements, world wide. In India the trade union movement was and is one of the strong institutions of democracy, however full of warts and patriarchy - but it is one of the bulwarks against state and corporate sector domination. Yet we do not see the national or world wide women's movement taking a global stand against the deconstruction of this institution.. One can go on giving examples of such isolation from mass based struggles, often led by women but dealing with natural resources, with political transparency, as for example the right to information movement in India.

That is the sharp difference between what I called a ventilated and yet political conference as in Mexico and the rather aseptic, bureaucratized responsive or reactive mode and ethos of the current conferences

Changing the condition of women- the hardships they face whether through poverty or the basic discrimination - requires monumental change in the social perceptions of woman , across caste, class ethnicity and other differences. Studies are showing that owning assets, bringing in income, being educated , even having equality in the social indicators , like the closeness to one of the GDI or GEM, as in Kerala in India, has not reduced either the violence against women or the dowry rates- nor the basic disregard which makes an adult or adolescent male rape a girl child even if she is a relative or a neighbour.

Deeply embedded fault lines and dirt has to be dug out ,like deep mining, from the ground of social and psychological consciousness of men and women, not only in India but worldwide.

Gender Equality , which is being given as the purpose of this conference, we are finding is a necessary but not sufficient condition of womens emancipation , not a sufficient condition for the removal of discrimination and oppression of the socially excluded sectors of society .

It may be stretching a point, but like overpowering Apartheid,- a white supremacy mind set, which derived its strength from deeply embedded attitudes that blacks were valueless, brainless, simple, feelingless , and can be used, abused (an understanding of racism which is stark and clear when you live in South Africa as I did for a year)- without the normal moral restraint, . so too what is needed in womens struggle is a focussed anti-apartheid type of struggle. Strategic, political, straight forward in its intent A long march to Freedom, headed by several Mandelas.

Because a similar kind of mindset , of woman as a value less person who can just be ill treated because that is what they are, is a deeply embedded attitude, world wide We May have made many dents in this rock, with our voices our data and presence.but not enough. The history of the world is full of heroines and rebels- who challenged these perceptions and values. The gains of conference journeys of the last 25 years have shown us how to use the international platform, the boys club- to recover the spirit and spirituality of these rebels, to generate a more focussed political resistance which claims a revaluation of woman.

For this long march to begin what is needed is political mobilisation of women, united, even if temporarily by their sex. We then have to move out of the conventional grip of the arrival hall - by which I mean that most movements when they gain self confidence and shape , think that being the subject of governments consideration is an achievement, the arrival hall.and lobbying for a conference document becomes the consuming energy.

The womens movement needs to lobby with itself, to engage in deep mining- as well as surface attacks on injustice, insensitivity, social hierarchies . In the preparations going up to World Conferences it might be useful - and empowering to NGOs - to consolidate, to draw together the ideas and experiences at the national and regional level of the women's movement , womens rebellion, independently of UN and other world mandates.

For example :

Future platforms:

The current high profile words in the globe are globalisation, governmance and [poverty eradication. The UN Secretary General's in his statement for the MilleniumSummit to be held in Washington in September, has given a call that poverty has to be eradicated and that eradicating poverty is basically a matter of good governance. Perhaps he means a more pro poor set of regulations which will make the entry of the rapacious market driven economic impulses adjust themselves to the needs of the poor and for inequity. However the word governance troubles the progressive movements in the developing countries. It has a genesis in our minds of the World Bank, which talked of good governance as managerial efficiency. And often thrust what can be called theoretical competitive economics which suggest that profit is a signal of efficiency, on to the bodies of the developing countries - ruining many of the countries particularly in Latin America and Africa. It is important to reflect on the terminology and perhaps move away from the notion of governance and management to transformation to better quality of representation, to a new politics, to ideologies which deal with injustices, exclusion, discrimination, New policies, by new leaders who represent, as well as break

down old hierarchies, can move out poverty (see DJ UNDP New York 1997. "This thing called poverty")

The redefining of governance from feminist experience, and changing the focus then from market determined efficiency, to the efficiency of a just and equitable society can be a response. A document could be drawn up which would be called something like 'women's advise to global governance'.

The term globalisation has become amorphous and boundary less like the word empowerment - its user defines its boundaries. I suggest we take the word regulation - a word that has come back into the rethink on globalisation even at Head quarters, by with I mean Washington and so on. There are suggestions for a better institutional mechanisms and laws and rules for every actor- the banks, the financial institutions, the MNCs even the internet operators after the various crises like the East Asian.

What is collectively women's advise to the international arrangements for regulation of economies, This could mean redesigning the participation in the discussions on a new financial architecture. It could mean separating the various groups that protested against WTO both in Seattle and in Washington, and making selective partners for the overall feminist thrust of justice, social justice, social peace and a just development.c. It could be women's advise for the millennium drawn from their experience.and not drawn as a reaction to a document.

It would mean a move away from taking a report card approach to the measuring of performance , like PFA monitoring , instead take a platform of ideas and practices emerging from large scale women's actions in the world and let it teach, speak to the UN and the BWI's towards a revised, reconstructed agenda.

It would be useful to identify one or at most two issues especially affecting the poor woman - around which the international women's movement rallies.The idea is to upturn the aims of a mobilisation to strengthen ourselves, as a social force, not a negotiating agency, which commands attention by its very presence and ethics.

There is talk of another conference , five years from now, this was mentioned by Angela King, with an invitation for ideas on its shape , ;necessity etc. I would like to ask you to consider an idea , that has been brewing in my mind. That we the ngowomen, set up or locate a nodal agency , or focal point . It could be UNIFEM, it could be a Committee of Wise Women. You recall the council of wise men, that was set up by a former Secretary General? The Mandate of this council would be to gather information on Womens mass struggles, rebellions, public actions , their efforts at the intellectual level to recast theories of knowledge, of strategies,- and draw a PLATFORM of proposals addressed out of that material. That platform would be like a harvesting of womens own experience of change and making of changes .

This Platform or set of proposals could form the basis of a world womens conference, called by the ten wise women, the international focal point, - and governments and the UN could be invited as observers. The conference would be an attempt at mobilisation of the strength , at the ground level , and if it is pledged , it could turn itself and thereby the womens movement into the most powerful lobby for social justice .

The struggle against racism has much to teach us as we have to teach those struggling against racism. The myths are in the mind and the politics is to sustain those myths. A highly political feminist movement , very broad based, with alliances with other such oppressed classes is necessary for the revolution that is needed to stop the careless crimes against women. When Charlotte and I began our journey with our woman identity clearly established, I wrote a piece for the first issue of the Magazine Quest that she had just launched. I called it Is feminism a uniting ideology? And thought it could be . The quest is still on and I don't think we are agreed on an answer. But as conference going women , we cannot continue to falter as while we do so, we are really turning away from the real incarceration of the masses of women , not only because of globalisation, or bad governance but because of that deeply embedded disdain for the women of the species in the minds of men ...