

Absent Visions: A Commentary on the Women's Conference in Beijing

Last year more than 28,000 women from 185 countries met to attend the Fourth World Conference of Women, from the 4th to the 15th of September, in the city of Beijing, China. This conference was organized by the United Nations in order to receive the input of women from all parts of the world to influence the Platform of Action, a document on women's rights, which was on the United Nations' agenda. The limited preparation and participation of Indigenous women in the conference is due to many factors beyond the control of the Delegation of Latin American Indigenous Women. Unfortunately, as other sources have said, the organizational structure and the agenda of the conference did not offer equal conditions of participation to Indigenous women.

From the beginning, there was a limited flow of information between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. The former had little access to contacts, information, and financial resources. From the level of the United Nations to the non-governmental organizations, space was not granted them as organized people. This was one of the biggest complaints that came out of the Meeting of Indigenous Women of the First Nations of Abya Yala, held from July 31 to August 4, 1995, in Ecuador.

The location of the conference made it hard for Indigenous women to attend. Only 30 Indigenous women arrived, an abysmal number (consider the number of Indigenous nations in the Americas). Getting funds to cover the costs of the flight was a great difficulty. Thus, in spite of the huge interest they expressed to attend this event, they were once again not able to partake in decision making processes that will affect their lives.

As stated above, the same financial factors and lack of support and commu-

nication hampered the preparatory continental meeting in Ecuador where some 150 women from 24 nationalities and communities met to elaborate their proposals to be sent to Beijing. The meeting took place later than planned, and as a result the Indigenous women's proposals were not received in time to be submitted in the final document of the Platform of Action.

In spite of these limitations, their proposals were presented in writing to the conference. Their document presented the vision of Indigenous women of Abya Yala, emphasizing the challenges of self-determination and the survival as a distinct peoples. Among others, the Declaration of Indigenous Women in Beijing put forward the following proposals and demands:

- (1) Recognize and respect our right to self-determination;
- (2) Recognize and respect our right to our territories and development, education, and health;
- (3) Stop human rights violations and all forms of violence against Indigenous women;
- (4) Recognize and respect our cultural and intellectual inheritance and our right to control the biological diversity in our territories;
- (5) Assure the political participation of Indigenous women and amplify their capabilities and their access to resources.

Essentially, the document stressed Indigenous territory as a key for the existence of Indigenous peoples. It also touched on intellectual property rights, which the women felt should be respected. It also called for the ratification of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 along with other declarations on the rights of Indigenous peoples. The Plan of Action of the World Conference of Women in Beijing, howev-

er, emphasized the economic problems that affect women, the globalization of the economy, and international women's rights—terms and concepts that few Indigenous women have experienced directly.

Another issue was the Indigenous Women's Delegation's concern over the agreement in Beijing that an investigation occur on Indigenous knowledge of health and management of natural resources. Indigenous women want to take part in the study and not only be its objects. They recognize the necessity of their participation so that the study include the Indigenous vision.

If one analyzes the theme of "human rights" in the Beijing proposal, it becomes clear that Indigenous women envision these "rights" differently. Indigenous women do not see themselves as competing with men. They have a more integral vision of themselves—not as individuals, but more as part of a community. In situations where women work in the formal economy, the resulting mentality is a competition between women and men. For most indigenous women, work is something shared in a community, and not a competition. Thus, the right of equality between Indigenous men and women is inseparable from this system of production where the concept of duality predominates, meaning that man and woman complement each other in what they think, do, and say.

Indigenous women's lack of participation was a significant weakness in Beijing. It illustrates the necessity for us to devise new strategies so that our vision can become an integral component of the broader women's movement, a presence to be recognized especially during watershed encounters like the Beijing conference. ♡