

Weaving a Tapestry of Strategies

by Leti Boniol

They want to change a rapidly globalizing world—a world that is getting worse for women all over the world.

From 18-19 November, 500 delegates, about 100 of them from outside Canada, shared situationers, exchanged views, sang, danced, prayed and performed so they can look forward to the day when globalization is transformed.

The worsening situation is not accidental, said Sunera Thobani, spokesperson of the Second International Women's Conference Against APEC (IWCA) in a speech she delivered during the Conference's opening plenary on 18 November in Vancouver, British Columbia in Canada. It is the outcome of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) agenda itself, which is based on the oppression of women, Thobani believed.

During an earlier press conference, Thobani told a large group of journalists that the Second Women's Conference "completely rejects APEC's anti-democratic policies of trade liberalization, deregulation and privatization for they promote human rights violations, erosion of democracy and social justice, environmental degradation and the in-

creased impoverishment of women and our communities. "The women's forum is the only People's Summit event that has taken a clear position in opposition to APEC, Thobani stressed. "Women are the worst affected by APEC's policies, but everywhere women are also at the forefront of struggles to ensure that people's needs and ecological integrity are at the center of any and all economic, social and political decision-making," Thobani added. The position re-affirmed that of the First Women's Conference held in November 1996 in Manila, which was attended by 74 women and two men delegates from 14 countries.

The Second Women's Conference, organized by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC)—Canada, was organized into four main themes: the subject of women and labor, human rights, the environmental impacts of APEC and other trade agendas. The second day, was devoted to building strategies and action plans. It was the first in a series of issue forums at the People's Summit which was held at the same time as the APEC leaders gathered for their ministerial meetings that preceded the summit of heads of state.

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ECONOMIC PLURALISM

Marjorie Cohen and Lee Ying Chuen, resource people for the Economic and Social Development Workshop, Cohen is the head of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, discussed how the economic and financial framework being created by big business and neo-conservative governments and institutions are widening the gap between rich and poor throughout the APEC region. "This provides a view of the world in which the interests of the powerful are defined as necessary, while the demands of the poor appear as greed," said Cohen.

In calling for a critical economic analysis, Cohen advocated economic pluralism—the need for not just one, but many different strategies to address globalization. She suggested the creation of an international institute to monitor the movement of capital around the world and to discipline corporations.

Lee Ying Chuen focused on the issues facing sweatshop workers in China. There are free trade zones in China that have few safety and environmental regulations. What protections do exist are being further downgraded or dismantled. Chuen also warned about the increase in occupational deaths among female workers in China.

MEGA DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

International pressure for globalization of the economy, such as that exerted by the World Bank (specifically, FAO projects and the economic push for foreign currency), have resulted in the emergence of the mega development projects. These projects receive

greater importance than individual rights according to Khushi Khabir, who works with landless peasants in Bangladesh. Khabir added that human rights are violated when production is threatened, environments are degraded by farming methods involving salination of land and water, forests are lost and other species are displaced.

The discussion on mega projects raised a number of questions. Where is the power of governments? Can we develop and make alternative policies at the national level? If GDP is not an appropriate means of measuring a country's growth, what is? How do shifts in policy and power work, and why do they happen? Closing the session, Sunera Thobani posed the following to take into today's action plan: What do we want to change, how can we take that forward and where do we start from?

FOCUSING ON THE ACTION PLAN

A crucial question in developing an action plan was whether to engage governments and other institutions behind globalization. In a workshop, women analyzed the possible outcomes of engaging or not engaging, and examined the sources of the different positions on the question.

Other workshops included consumer campaigns and boycotts; children's rights (including child labor and sex trafficking); the question of a borderless world and challenging nation-state structures; challenging the hyper-mobility of capital, the creation of regulatory bodies and the changing economic systems; mobilizing and organizing.

Cheung Lai-ha from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, speaking on labor, pointed out that "government is focusing on high growth sectors and ignores the effects on women and also plans to employ huge numbers of migrant workers." She said, "businesses cry out for wage suppression in the name of developing the economy." The Provisional Legislative Council calls for a suppression of wage increases against inflation and has moved to repeal labor laws protecting the rights of workers. Lai-ha stressed that "our next important act is to educate and organize woman to fight for our rights."

In a passionate speech on human rights violations, Bella Galhos of East Timor told the audience "In the past 23 years, one-third of my people have died, and the murder, rape and torture continue." Galhos condemned "grand rhetorical speeches about human rights." She does not believe that trade allows dialogue. "APEC is another forum where General Suharto will ignore the East Timorese people. They will be sacrificed in the name of economic development. Suharto will insist if [that] Canada wants to trade with Indonesia, Canada must ignore the human rights violations of his country." "There is no freedom of expression or ideas" in her country, said Galhos. She ended her speech with a song because "to express our struggle, we do it through song."

Khushi Khabir from Bangladesh said, "protection of the environment is not a luxury, and women must lead in the movement." Khabir explained that in her culture, "en-

vironment encompasses more than the physical environment. It includes family relationships, social relationships and relationships with nature." She added that "women are the nurturers of the family, and of the land the family lives on," but that under the new agenda what women grow and how they grow it "is completely taken over by the market."

Khabir's strategies focused on widening the understanding of the global situation and on being dictated by the market: building local resistance and alternatives that do not feed international markets. To women outside Bangladesh, Khabir reiterated the importance of building strong movements as a means of supporting women in her country.

HIGHLIGHTS

In the end, the second International Women's Conference Against APEC agreed to:

- ◆ Continue communication, including using and improving existing networks, and to set up an international coordinating body to build on the first two Women's Conferences
- ◆ Coordinate national and international popular theatre campaigns which uses music, dance and performance to make their message clear
- ◆ Debunk the myth of corporate social responsibility and develop alternative structures such as co-ops, credit unions and barter systems
- ◆ Recognize intellectual property rights, protect women and children from violence and develop culturally-appropriate programs; uphold self-determination and equal representation and issue a call to keep aboriginal land out of trade agreements

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- ◆ Reach out to youth, support migrant workers, develop gender-sensitivity in union programs and break down barriers that keep women from union leadership positions; organize in non-traditional sectors
- ◆ Re-affirm and build on the position of last year's conference in Manila and fight for workers' and human rights, regardless of the question of engagement with APEC
- ◆ Put pressure on corporate accountability, mobilizing through education and acting from the perspectives of the workers involved (not calling boycotts unless asked); demand the right to know the conditions under which products are made and the promotion of incentives for corporations
- ◆ "Feed the family and trade the leftovers"
- ◆ Build alliances, educate workers, and destroy the myth that APEC creates jobs, a myth that also leads to the destruction of the environment
- ◆ Create centers for children, put more money into education, work to have laws that prosecute sex tourists and develop alternative means of income for families
- ◆ Have faith on our daughters. As the women said it: "it's okay to pass the torch because we've got the fire"
- ◆ Make the sessions of the next conference accessible to disabled women; organize sensitivity training for IWCA workers and volunteers; distribute clear information; consider quiet rooms; provide American Sign Language (ASL) signers and other devices, refrain from the use of scents and perfumes; ask women with disabilities about potential needs

and be pro-active.

SURPASSING EXPECTATIONS

"One of the goals of the women's conference was to strengthen an international women's movement," said Nandita Sharma, an organizer at the Women's Conference. Sharma said the women's conference was a huge success. "It surpassed all of our expectations," she said. "The turnout and interest in issues showed that women are really hungry for an activist-based women's movement. "One of the biggest historical mistakes we can make," said Sharma, "is to ignore it."

Concepcion Garcia Ramilo, of Isis International-Manila and a member of the steering committee of the First International Women's Conference, said that the second conference is a "big improvement in terms of attendance and range of participants." The Zapatista women were not in the first conference, she said. She also noted that more areas of concern were discussed in the 1997 Conference, such as the disabled and children.

The Second Conference, however, did not indicate the extent of accomplishment of the first conference's action plans. ☺

References:

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