

# Breakthrough with the World Bank

by Sonia del Valle

Mexico City—The international campaign “Women’s Eyes On The World Bank” recently struck an important three-point deal with top officials of this powerful financial institution.

According to the agreement, the Bank will, from now on, facilitate more information about its investment projects to the general public; it has pledged to analyse how women may be incorporated more fully into the global development process; and it has agreed to call on the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean to open up their negotiation processes on matters of economic policy and lines of investment to civil society.

This agreement was announced by representatives of the World Bank and of women’s organisations following a series of meetings held in Washington in May. Among the participants was one of the Bank’s most senior officials, Masood Ahmed, World Bank vice-president and head of the Poverty Reduction and Economic Management (PREM) Network and the Gender Sector Board.

These commitments by the World Bank are the first concrete achievements obtained as a result of a strategy of political pressure which began during the Fourth International Women’s Conference, held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. The Economic Justice Group meeting at the conference drafted a petition to the World Bank containing four specific demands and collected more than 1,000 signa-



The World Bank will now look at women’s fuller involvement in development.

tures of conference participants. The petition was then presented to the World Bank president, James Wolfensohn.

The first demand was that “*negotiation processes between the World Bank and governments, which are still confidential in many countries, should be opened up to civil society.*” This would allow civil society to gain access to information about Country Assistance Strategies (CAS), which establish the Bank’s lines of investment and the objectives these pursue (for example, which state companies or public sector services will be privatised, which taxes will be raised, which sectors will be reduced or which laws will be modified).

The second demand was “*the institutionalization of gender per-*

*spective in the Bank’s policies and programs around the world*” to address the differentiated impact which projects financed by the World Bank have on men and women. The idea is also to address cultural, social, legal, political and economic differences which prevent women from being direct beneficiaries of development.

The third demand called for the World Bank to *increase “investment in women, both in projects associated with women or considered to be ‘feminine’ (health, education, agriculture) as well as in those regarded as nonfeminine, such as structural adjustment, finance, credit, water and sanitation.”*

The fourth demand was to “*increase the number of women, both in terms of racial and ethnic*

*diversity, in the Bank's decision-making positions.*" The eight women who began discussions with the World Bank in Beijing returned to their respective countries to launch the international campaign "Women's Eyes On The World Bank." The campaign followed up on the commitments made by James Wolfensohn in September 1995 and aimed to transform the World Bank's investment policies to respond to women's needs and demands.

Nearly three years later, this international financial institution has already introduced a number of changes and has established the Consultative Council on Gender, whose task is to evaluate progress in relation to women and to make recommendations in this regard.

However, gender inequality remains a marginal issue for many, and one which relies largely on the goodwill and personal interest of the Bank's officials rather than an institutional policy.

Thanks to these negotiations, coordinated in Latin America and the Caribbean by Laura Frade, the doors of the World Bank are now open to those who wish to influence the discussion on the conceptual framework of gender work, so that the Bank can develop a global and regional policy and devise mechanisms and indicators to evaluate and approve projects.

According to Frade, "The starting point for this conceptual framework should be the existing gender inequalities, in order to establish the minimum standards to be reached and the appropriate resources, procedures and mechanisms to evaluate the projects which the Bank finances in our countries."

Frade enumerated the main achievements of over 200 women's organisations that participated in the campaign organised in ten countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

"We have given priority to the

first and second demands presented to the Bank in Beijing and we have already obtained results: a gender team for the region has been established and the CAS (Country Assistance Strategies) have been opened up in Haiti, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Bolivia and Peru. At present, we're negotiating a proposal to analyse the Bank's projects in nine countries, with the participation of the institution. The results will be presented at a tripartite regional seminar."

In Mexico, the campaign is based on the principle that to achieve a human and sustainable form of development, the active participation of women in all spheres of life—social, political, and economic—is indispensable, Frade added.

In this sense, the institutionalisation of gender perspective is not simply a methodological tool to identify differences between men and women in quantitative and qualitative terms. It is also an instrument to ensure that women's human rights are respected and exercised.

The great dilemma currently facing the World Bank, governments and organised women is "how to be, or not to be, incorporated" into the process of development. This is urgent because, now more than ever before, macroeconomic policies are having contradictory effects in the region.

For example, while the number of women who work in the formal and informal sectors of the economy is increasing, so too is that of women who live in conditions of extreme poverty. As the number of women who are victims of domestic and social violence grows, so does the number of women who head households. Moreover, while the population growth rate is declining, the number of women who die from diseases or complications related to maternity is actually increasing.

All this despite the thousands of millions of dollars (US\$ 31,637B in the past five years) which have been assigned to reduce poverty and guarantee a "sustained and sustainable" model of development in the region's countries, the so-called "transition economies."

Latin America's economic transition process began to be imposed or negotiated from the beginning of the 1980s when the countries of the region faced a common problem: the nonpayment of their debts to international financial institutions belonging to the World Bank group.

These debts, contracted between the mid-1950s and the end of the 1970s, in the form of loans for "development," were spent on infrastructure expansion and improvements: water and electricity services, drainage and sanitation systems, dams, roads and bridges.

To pay back these debts, the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean were persuaded by the World Bank to adopt Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and ensure a transition from welfare state economies to market economies.

The SAPs, which are now about to conclude, resulted in strict economic measures including cutbacks in government spending on the social sector, large-scale loss of jobs in the formal sector, and growing poverty among women.

The women's movement, inevitably, began to critique the Bank's policies and demand that instead of being treated as passive recipients of development, they be consulted in the drafting of the macroeconomic policies that affect them so drastically.

In the next years, women's eyes, they warn, will be kept sharply focused on the World Bank.

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