

The Case for A Fifth World Conference

By Suzette Mitchell

Since the fourth World Conference on Women (WCW) in Beijing in 1995, I have been studying the impact of the conference process on different levels of civil society from the global governance context, including the UN, national governments, the global women's movement(s), NGOs and individuals. From the interviews with hundreds of inspiring women from around the globe, I believe it is the personal transformation of individual women from the North and South within the WCW process that is its strength, and an essential part of the strengthening of the women's movement for change.

The women I interviewed became committed, or renewed their commitment, to a sense of solidarity with women in the struggle for equality and equal rights. These women, though of different backgrounds, political beliefs, races, ages, classes and ethnicities, share common aims and strategies for women's empowerment. The networking experience in Beijing became a site for the empowerment of women due to reinforcement from and collaboration with others. In Huairou, the women cited the following reasons for attending the NGO Forum: networking, solidarity, and learning from others—elements of an environment conducive to empowerment.

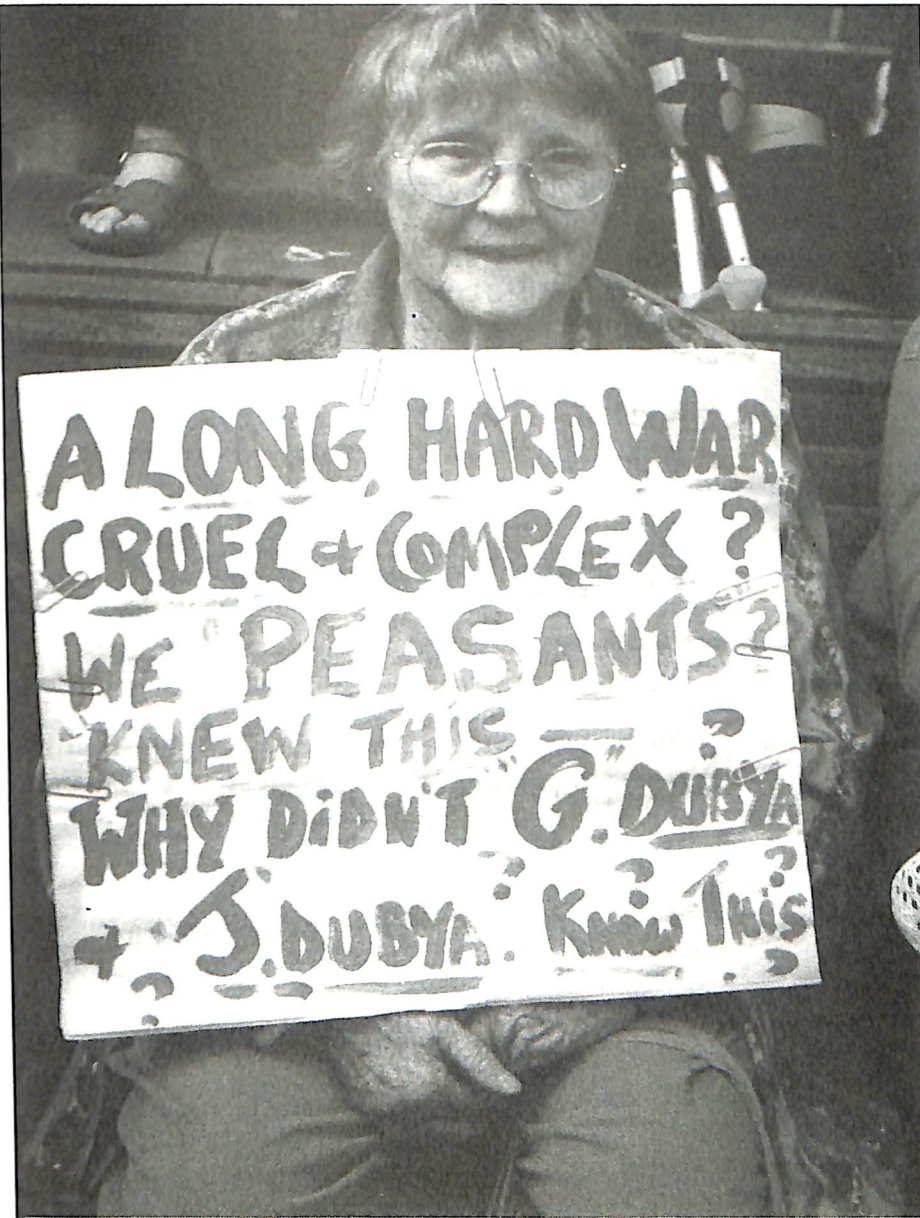
In using the Pacific country of Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a site to explore the experience of Beijing for several women of the South, I hope to illustrate how an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge with women from other regions often

changes the lives of women from remote areas. This experience of an international gathering of women who share the goal of advancing their rights is fundamentally different from an e-mail exchange or an Internet conference, or a regional meeting of experts.

The interviews conducted with several women from PNG who attended the Conference and/or Forum focused on the element of personal change and empowerment. Interviewed in 1997, Lydia Gah, then the Vice President of the Business and Professional Women's Association of West New Britain (WNB), a remote island region of PNG, said Beijing was one of the most important events in her life. She has since set up a savings account for her daughter's attendance of the UN World Conference on Women in 2005, certain of the impact of such an experience. She reflected:

In Beijing, it was like colour just disappeared... Women just "spoke the same language" as women from all other countries. I went to Beijing thinking women face "these" problems, but whatever we face is just the same problem as other women, maybe just on a different scale. (Gah, 1997)

Many of the women from PNG at the Conference and the Forum had never attended an international women's conference before. In fact, many had not even ventured out of PNG before. Emele Duituturaga worked as an NGO Adviser to the national women's machinery, the Department of Home Affairs, which served as the focal point for government and NGO preparations for the Conference. In an interview reflecting on the significance of the Beijing process, Duituturaga said:



A demonstration in Melbourne, Australia against the US occupation of Iraq

The highlight was when the NGO Delegation got on the plane and I looked in that plane and there were women who had never left their villages before. It was just like I was part of this, and I knew, looking at these women, that they would never be the same again. It was just a magical moment after all the heartaches and everything... It was solidarity. We women were ready to go and face the world (Duituturaga, 1997).

Duituturaga recalled the transformation of women from their initial trepidation to their empowerment as participants in a global forum:

I recall vividly the first couple of days when these (NGO) women wouldn't leave. They would want us to hold their hand and brief them. Three days later, the same women just about missed you on the street and they are lecturing American and Korean women about PNG. I was seeing the learning curve that these individual women experienced. (Duituturaga, 1997)

The personal transformation of others is not a process many people are given the opportunity to witness, let alone be a part of. For Duituturaga, being part of such a moving process was inspiring. In

considering the direct results of the Beijing process, she said:

Women mobilising. It happened before Beijing. It happened in Beijing. Although there is not mobilisation at the national level, you see these women who have been to Beijing and they are mobilising in the settlements, mobilising in the villages. If they can continue to do this, sooner or later, it's going to join up. And the transformation too. It takes a personal experience to transform and if I could do it all over again I would take 1, 000 Papua New Guinean women because if you take them out of their reality, all of a sudden they see the light... Just seeing these women transform. And when I see them now they are

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not the same women. Their clothing has changed. I mean they are still struggling on, but they are fiery, they have confidence. That's something, the mobilising... (Duituturaga, 1997)

Same Stories, Different Places

What becomes evident through these quotes is that women share similar empowerment stories from widely different countries and contexts. The sharing of similar experiences of male violence, poverty, political persecution, or other forms of discrimination often creates a bond between women from vastly different regions or countries. An example is how Agnes Titus' insights into the effects of war on woman and children from PNG were echoed by women from Somalia and other war-afflicted nations.

The personal transformation that became a part of the Beijing process has left a strong legacy visible in feminist praxis. It is important to see the empowerment of women not only in the context of their own identities, but from a broader context. If the impact of women's empowerment were solely at the individual level, the Beijing process would be severely limiting, even de-politicising in terms of mobilisation within the context of a women's movement. However, the WCW experience does not represent isolated experiences; it illustrates a sharing of thoughts and actions for a common purpose. As one delegate put it, "I came with my own strength and I left Beijing with the strength of thousands of women." (AWEPA, 1997:33).

The political climate at the UN is too dangerous to allow women's global rights to be reopened for discussion in 2005. This is clear to us, but what about those women from rural areas around the world whose lives changed in 1995 and want to share this experience with others? What about women from a Pacific country who opened an account to save money for their daughters to attend such a life-changing event? Whether a fifth WCW is held in 2010 or at another date, it is important that such a Conference, or some form of it, takes place. The challenge we as feminist activists need

to consider as 2005 approaches is to explain why the fifth WCW is not being staged in 2005, and to provide an alternative site/time for a gathering of the world's women.

Our global movement cannot afford to isolate these women and we need to draw from their strength and vision. If another international conference through the UN is at the moment inappropriate, then we should look at creating this space ourselves and ensuring the presence of these women. ♪

Reference:

AWEPA (1997). *Women in Decision-Making: Empowerment for Action*. Seminar Report, Cape Town, South Africa, 5 September 1996. South Africa: AWEPA, UNDP and the African European Institute.

Footnotes

* The questionnaire distributed at the Beijing Conference and NGO Forum included the question: Why did you come to this conference? The most common responses were: to influence the agenda; to network; to increase awareness of issues; to learn from other women; solidarity/to be a part of the women's movement; to be a part of an event; or to represent an organisation/country delegation. Most of these statements reflect personal and individual desires, or aspirations to share their personal experiences with others as part of a group or movement with common, identifying characteristics.

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