

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

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Preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women

The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations has been very active during the past year convening world conferences in order to redefine its goals and strategies for international cooperation on major issues. In September 1994, delegations from many nations met in Cairo for the International Conference on Population and Development. In March 1995, Copenhagen was the venue for the World Summit for Social Development. In September 1995, Beijing will be the setting for the Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women. In preparation for the latter conference, international delegations met in New York during March and April to prepare the Platform for Action, which is to be ratified in Beijing. The draft document was prepared by the Secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women after consultation with regional groups of the United Nations. In New York, delegations were to propose amendments to the Platform for Action so that it would be ready for ratification in Beijing. At least that was the plan. The following report will describe how political agendas, arrogance, and bickering prevented the task from being completed. Perhaps the greatest obstacle, however, was the belief that every country in the world could reach consensus on so many contentious issues—there is a better chance of the holy grail being found this year.

First, for those who are not familiar with the dynamics of the United Nations, I need to sketch out the role of the major players. On one side of the floor of the UN, members of the European Union (EU) huddle together; the representative from France is their spokesperson. On the other side of the floor sits the representative from the Philippines, who is the spokesperson for the Group of 77 (G77). The G77, which now actually comprises 132 members, includes almost all nations from Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia. Members of the EU and the G77 meet in their respective groups before the main assembly convenes in order to formulate a group position. On the floor of the UN, it is therefore the spokespersons of these two groups who are the most active.

It is significant that while 132 diverse nations were able to meet and, in most cases, bring about a consensus on difficult issues, the United

States acted alone and took the floor almost as often as the G77. Of course, the United States was not the only independent delegation; Canada, Norway, and the Vatican were also active in their independent amendments. But the United States seemed less concerned about reaching consensus with the delegations at the UN than with pleasing lobby groups back home. Time after time, for example, the United States proposed an amendment that obviously had been prepared well in advance, despite the fact that another delegation had made a nearly identical amendment just minutes before.

The Platform for Action began with a mission statement and a framework for the strategies discussed in the document. We are reminded that, in 1985, the nations of the world adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. In general, however, it is believed that in the intervening ten years the situation for women worldwide has become worse instead of better. The reasons for this decline include global recession, the AIDS crisis, wars, and certain economic policies. The G77 tried to stress at every opportunity the harmful effects of many macroeconomic policies on their economies in general and on women in particular. Structural adjustments imposed by the World Bank and other effects of debt servicing have made poor and developing nations incapable of providing the services necessary to advance women. Needless to say, the EU and the United States were not very warm to these ideas. Similarly, when the EU tried to add that "colonial and alien domination or foreign occupation" were hurting nations' attempts to advance beneficial socioeconomic policies, the United States objected.

The areas of the Platform for Action that were the most contentious, however, were those that involved women's rights, abortion, contraception, sex education, and related issues. These were also the topics that solicited the most intense lobbying from those nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) present at the meeting. The Coalition for Women and the Family, for example, distributed leaflets criticizing the use of the term "gender perspective" in the Platform for Action. Its members claimed that the use of this term undermines the family, since it means that everything should be seen "as a power struggle between men and women." They were also active in opposing the right to abortion. Interestingly, a Muslim physicians' group from London joined this coalition, apparently in full agreement with its position. It was disturbing that these Muslim physicians did not even acknowledge the widely held position in Islamic law that abortion before ensoulement of the fetus (often said to be forty days) is not absolutely forbidden.

Another Muslim NGO coalition, headed by the International Islamic Council for Dawah and Relief, was also active in lobbying Muslim delegations. The concerns of this coalition included the vulnerability of women in war (with Bosnia most obviously in mind) and social evils, such as pornography, that contribute to the exploitation of women. This group

did not call for the prohibition of abortion, but stressed that unsafe abortions are a significant cause of maternal death. One wonders if it is significant that, on the one hand, this Saudi Arabia-based Muslim coalition was so active, while on the other hand Saudi Arabia did not even have an official delegation at the proceedings.

It was one of the curious aspects of the meeting that no delegate from Saudi Arabia was present to defend "Islamic values," while the governments of Egypt and Jordan, often accused of being "un-Islamic," were active in seeking to preserve the right of Muslims to follow Islamic family law. The Iranian delegation was very active in this regard. Unfortunately, it seemed to have been unable to find a woman capable of articulating its position. The Sudanese delegation, on the other hand, included Dr. Khadija Karar, a highly articulate defender of the Muslim perspective.

What was this Muslim perspective? More than a defence of Islamic law, it was an understanding of the problems of women from a particular angle. Thankfully, no Muslim delegation, with the occasional exception of Iran, had a naive or reactionary position on women. Muslim delegates agreed that women's education is essential and that women must be protected from genital mutilation and domestic violence. Muslims agreed that men must be socialized to consider women as their partners in the family and that girls must be socialized to be more outgoing. But Muslims wanted to stress that the problems being discussed, such as the massive number of female-headed households living in poverty and the alarming spread of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, cannot be solved without strengthening the family as an institution. Muslim delegations were not alone in this position: The Vatican and some G77 delegations, particularly Nicaragua, tried to introduce amendments that emphasized the importance of the family. Any such measures, however, were greeted with derision by the EU.

The Vatican, for example, tried to add a clause to the following paragraph:

[Governments should provide] adequate safety nets and strengthen state and community-based support systems, as an integral part of social policy, to enable poor women to withstand adverse economic environments and preserve their livelihood and assets in times of crisis.

The clause proposed for inclusion by the Vatican was "to strengthen the family as the primary safety mechanism." It seemed like a reasonable enough proposal, but from the grimaces, guffaws, and sneers of the EU members, one would have thought that the Vatican was trying to have chastity belts distributed by government agencies. Indeed, the overwhelming impression was that the EU considers any kind of religious discourse or ethos to be oppressive to women.

While opposing vigorously any amendment supporting family or religious values, the EU was busy making its own amendments. Most of these proposals were well-informed and quite sensible; others pushed an agenda more extreme than anything the Vatican or any other delegation attempted. For instance, EU amendments to the section dealing with violence against women, taken as a whole, would prohibit any kind of restraint being placed on young girls in order to prevent sexual liaisons. While no one advocated violence against women, the EU definition of violence includes the "arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." The wording of the amendments makes it clear that no one, even the family, could prevent a teenage girl from "controlling her sexuality." Ironically, many delegations balked when Egypt wanted to change the phrase "teen-age pregnancy," which occurred often in the text, to "unwanted pregnancy." Evidently a young woman's pregnancy within marriage was considered more problematic to some delegations than teen-aged girls having nonmarital sexual relations.

It is unfortunate that the attempts of certain delegations to push their own agendas slowed the amending process to such an extent that the Platform for Action remained, by the end of three weeks, only a draft document. Despite the chairperson's pleas to delegations to consider whether their actions were really helping the women and girls of the world, bickering continued and even reached the point of some delegations blocking the proposals of other delegations out of pure spite.

At a time when millions of women and their families are suffering and deprived of the most basic needs, one wonders if the Commission on the Status of Women is doing the best it can to help them. Yet the points upon which consensus was reached were important. All delegates agreed that women must be given a full share in decision-making if the world is to be a more peaceful place and a place where women do not suffer in disproportionate numbers. Only when governments and development agencies recognize the importance of women having independent economic resources will women and their children have enough to eat.

These are issues that Muslim countries and organizations have to confront honestly if they are truly concerned about the welfare of women. In my experience, Muslim relief and development projects have often been unsuccessful because women were not involved in the decision-making process. Among the Muslim organizations working with Afghan refugees during the war against the Soviets, for example, only the Sudanese-based Islamic Relief Association had women involved at all levels of administration. Not surprisingly, despite the criticism levelled against them by many Arab organizations for including women, the Sudanese had the most effective relief programs for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This assertion is not made blindly; it is the result of my experience as the director of Human Concern International's Project for Afghan

Refugee Women in Peshawar, Pakistan, during 1987–88 and in my official capacity as advisor to the Delegation of Afghanistan to the thirty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations.

We can only hope that the world community will meet in Beijing in September in a greater spirit of cooperation so that women may begin to experience the positive effects of new policies and outlooks.

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