

ment, they did not make any demands which could have aggravated the situation, thus losing precious time.

13. Most progressive theologians and interpreters of the Quran introduce a historical factor in their analysis of the improvement that Mohanmad brought to women in his time; for instance, they would quote his opposition to female infanticide. Others would research on rights for women to end their marriage or own property, looking at it both from the point of view of religious rights and customary rights.
14. For example, in the Arab and Middle East tradition women would keep their father's name throughout their lives and would be known as X, daughter of Y (or would also be referred to as X, mother of Z). Now bureaucrats are imposing the Western tradition of the husband's name. Considering the number of divorces and repudiations, women will now have to be called by 4 or 5 different names in their life. Their sense of self-identity will certainly be shattered. Bureaucrats do not seem troubled with this introduction of such an alien tradition.
15. Though women who join fundamentalist groups claim that they get all these benefits, it clearly appears as self-justificatory. Nevertheless, one has to admit that neither the Left nor governments have even pretended to cater to the needs of people the way fundamentalists do. As an example, in Algeria in the late 1970s, when there was neither food on the market nor clothing in the shops to buy (regardless of prices), the Muslim Brothers were the ones who distributed the semolina (the basis of couscous, a very popular basic dish), as well as "Islamic dress" at the mosques on Fridays. This is how the hijab Iranian style—definitely an untraditional women's dress in Algeria—was introduced in our country. The Muslim Brothers in Algeria and fundamentalist groups in many other countries are the only ones who have both the will and the money to afford to be populists. Their money obviously comes from various state sources, which allow them to generate income and finance their projects. The powerful Arkam, who was visited by a woman activist in Malaysia, has branches in many countries both in Asia and in Africa, as well as in non-Muslim countries (for instance in Australia): they own factories, produce for their own communities who live in autarchy, both in terms of self-subsistence, and for grants, teachings, and religious education.
16. In 1988 the network Women Living Under Muslim Laws planned to explore the possibilities of gathering and circulating information on progressive interpretations of Islam; this project later evolved into identifying feminist interpreters of the Quran, then gathering and circulating their work. In 1988 an international working group on feminist interpretation of the Quran was launched which held its first meeting in July 1990 in Karachi; since then the group meets regularly; the research done is circulated within the network Women Living Under Muslim Laws.
17. Male progressive interpreters of the Quran have often paid with their lives for their decision to undertake *Ijtihad*. In recent years Tahar Haddad was persecuted in Tunisia, Asghar Ali Engineer escaped bombs in India, and the Sudanese Nour Mahmoud Mohamed Tahir was killed in 1984. The latter's books were publicly burnt, his body buried in a hidden place to prevent pilgrimage, and the possession of his books was punishable.
18. See various publications by Women Living Under Muslim Laws network: *Information Kit on Marriage Contracts and the Delegated Right of Divorce Talaq et tafwez* (1989); *Proceedings of the Meeting on Interpretations of the Koran by Women* (1991); *Les Femmes dans le Coran: Kit d'information préparé pour la réunion du Groupe International de Travail sur les Interprétations Coraniques par les Femmes* (Juillet 1990, Karachi: Femmes Sous Lois Musulmanes); *Women in the Qur'an: Information Kit prepared for Women Living Under Muslim Laws* (July 1990). International Working Meeting on Qur'anic Interpretation by Women (Karachi).
19. The claim by fundamentalists that any individual is a threat to the whole of Islam is well illustrated by the Rushdie affair.
20. On the forefront of secularism and the separation of religion from the state are the Algerian women, whose stands are published in *Dossier* no. 7 and 8. *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON U.S. WOMEN OF COLOR AND THE UNITED NATIONS FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND NGO FORUM IN BEIJING, CHINA

Mallika Dutt

Over a year has passed since 40,000 women gathered at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. A watershed event in the history of global women's movements, Beijing had an important impact on women's movements in the United States. Seven thousand U.S. women participated in the conference, and many of them were women of color. This article reflects on the role and participation of women of color in the women's conference and explores the possible implications of the impact of Beijing on political trends in the United States. Conversations with nine women of color organizers and activists (Alice Cardona, Idélisse Malavé, Lori Pourier, Catherine Powell, Beth Richie, Loretta Ross, Peggy Saika, Rinku Sen, and Ingrid Washinawatok) are interwoven into my own analysis of and involvement in the largest United Nations gathering in history. Of the nine women, three are African American, two are Latina, two are Native American, and two are Asian American. Seven of them attended the Beijing conference; the two who did not go were involved in several pre-Beijing activities.

Four main themes emerged from my conversations and observations. The first was the vibrancy and power of the global women's movement and the corresponding lack of unity and strength in U.S. counterparts. The second had to do with the globalization of the world economy and its impact on the United States. The third concerned the tension experienced around the category "women of color," and the fourth led from the profound transformation in consciousness post-Beijing to the struggle to implement that transformation into day-to-day organizing.

Discovering the Power of Global Women's Movements

For most women from the United States, Beijing was an eye-opening, humbling, and transformative experience. U.S. women were startled by the sophisticated analysis and well-organized and powerful voices of women from other parts of the

world, particularly those of women from the South. Saddled with years of imperialist history along with its corresponding baggage of U.S. superiority, racism, xenophobia, and insularity, women in the United States seldom connect issues of local organizing to international arenas. Even long-time activists and organizers perceive women in other parts of the world as more oppressed, less organized, less vocal, and certainly not as "feminist" as their U.S. counterparts. Images like female genital mutilation, dowry deaths, and public stoning of women form the dominant perception about the lives of women overseas. The discovery that these "victims" were in fact a far more powerful voice for change in the 1990s than the women's movement in the United States has provided an important starting point in changing the nature of the dialogue between women in the United States and women in other parts of the world.

For women of color, the discovery and connection with strong voices from the South was particularly important. Almost all the women I spoke with described the sense of global solidarity, pride, and affirmation that they experienced in Beijing. This sense of affirmation had greater resonance, because of the sense of siege that pervades the political environment in the United States, with the attacks on women and communities of color, particularly immigrant women, African American women on welfare, and lesbians. Feelings of frustration and impotence that defined women's political activism in the United States were shattered by the atmosphere of collective power that was palpable in Beijing. As Cathy Powell, an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, so eloquently stated, "Although I was depressed about the U.S. women's movement, I felt very proud to be part of a global movement which has been a source of great inspiration in my work. I met amazing women in amazing struggles and feel very affirmed by the loose and diverse broader global women's movement."

The global solidarity and breadth of issues that were discussed in Beijing brought into stark relief the constraints of single-issue and single-identity organizing in the United States. For Peggy Saika, an environmental justice activist and executive director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, the overarching lesson of Beijing was the interconnectedness of issues and people. Indeed, although activists in the United States see connections when they come together across identity or issue lines, the opportunities to do so are few. In Beijing, Saika felt the connections every day, with 40,000 women from around the world discussing everything from peace to education.

The fragmentation of the U.S. women's movement was visually represented in the dialogues that took place in the regional tents. At the NGO Forum, women from different regions gathered in their geographic tents to share ideas, networks, and develop strategies. Idélisse Malavé, a litigator for Puerto Rican civil rights and vice-president of the Ms Foundation, said the Latin American tent was like a bazaar where an organizing committee held thematic workshops, meetings, and strategy discussions. Women tried to build a common ideological base through dialogue, a process Malavé found very powerful. In contrast, the North American tent was empty and sterile, used only sporadically as an ad hoc meeting place.

both U.S. women of color and white women from North America and Europe gathered in more active areas.

Understanding the Place of the United States in the Global Arena

Women of color left Beijing with a heightened awareness of the interaction of local and global forces on women in the United States, particularly economic forces. The adverse impact on women of the globalization of the world economy was a central theme at the NGO Forum. Women from the United States discovered that their stories of social service cutbacks, loss of jobs, corporate downsizing, attacks on women on welfare, and an increase in women's poverty were echoed by women from the South who described the impact of structural adjustment programs in their countries. Women from the South, however, had a far more sophisticated analysis of the role of international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (both dominated by the U.S. government), as well as the role of international capital markets and transnational corporations in the economic marginalization and exploitation of women.

Beijing helped Loretta Ross, organizer in the National Black Women's Health Project and executive director of the Center for Human Rights Education, understand that the globalization of the economy had to be an integral part of her organizing in the United States. For her, Beijing meant questioning the "American dream" which assumes the ability to acquire and consume material goods if one works hard enough, an assumption called into question by the world economy, which makes working-class people and people of color dispensable. This meant that the economic assumptions that had guided U.S. social change movements needed to be reevaluated. It became clear to Ross that if U.S. women did not build global movements like an international human rights movement and a global labor movement, they would become part of the global free-fall.

Lori Pourier, who staffs the Indigenous Women's Network, said: "Beijing opened my eyes to the role of international decision makers. My experience of racism was limited to living as an indigenous woman in the border town of Pine Ridge, South Dakota. I had been too focused on the trust responsibilities of the U.S. government and was not looking at the global picture." Meeting indigenous women from other parts of the world who were grappling not only with the impact of dictatorships but also with the impact of institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and transnational corporations, helped Pourier to understand the role of the United States in these organizations as well as the role of global forces within the United States.

Ingrid Washinawatok, a citizen of the Menominee Nation and co-chair of the Indigenous Women's Network, said that Beijing allowed the indigenous women who attended to "step out of their views of their own oppression to go, hear, share, and feel the oppression of other women. This was important because if you stay localized and only within your own people, it atrophies you, makes you resentful, and leads to inaction."

Searching for Identity and Location in Beijing

For many women of color who sought to create bonds with women from their continents of origin, Beijing was often painful. The difficulties encountered by women of color in connecting with these women were interwoven with the history of their migration to the United States. For African American women, the legacy of slavery meant that few know their specific countries of origin and claiming common ground with African women was more difficult for them than the geographic and cultural connections through which Asian American and Latinas have a ready frame of reference. For indigenous women, whose presence in and claim to the United States precedes all other ethnic and racial communities, ideas of self-determination and sovereignty resonate most closely with indigenous women from other parts of the world. However, despite these differences in location, in Beijing, all women of color had to overcome the suspicion and hostility that came from being perceived as "Americans" by women from the South.

Negatively held perceptions of Americans as interfering, arrogant, ignorant, insensitive, and imperialist were ascribed to women of color as well as to white women from the United States. These attitudes forced women of color constantly to confront the role of the United States as an aggressor and violator of human rights even as they perceived themselves as oppositional forces within the country. Thus, as Rinku Sen, codirector of the Center for Third World Organizing, stated, women of color had continually to make decisions about how they identified themselves in relation to women from the South. Although some expected to make immediate connections with women from their home countries, others were more careful in how they identified themselves—as women from the South living in the North, as women of color from the United States, as immigrant women, or as women from their particular ethnic or racial background. According to Sen, women of color sought self-definitions to avoid rejection by their Southern counterparts.

As many women from both the United States and the South have pointed out, U.S. women have usually been involved with women in other countries in the context of academic research, development aid, or involvement in other women's movements. Thus, hundreds of dissertations have been written about women's lives in the Third World by women from the United States, but rarely do women from the South come to "study" U.S. women or write dissertations on government abuse of women on welfare or the attacks by the religious Right on abortion providers in this country. Similarly, women from other parts of the world have not presumed to define the agenda of U.S. women's movements in the same way that some women from this country have insisted that women's movements in other countries prioritize female genital mutilation, dowry deaths, or religious persecution. This simplistic understanding of women's lives ignores the depth and breadth of women's organizing in other parts of the world. The anger felt by women from other parts of the world at this often racist and culturally biased perception of their work has been exacerbated by the fact that most U.S. women's movements have seldom addressed the role played by their own government in the violations of women's

human rights the world over whether through the training of military personnel for dictatorships, the location of military bases, the programs of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, or the actions of U.S. corporations overseas.

On Being "Women of Color" and Organizing for Beijing

Women of color today appear to be far more focused on organizing within their own ethnic communities than across color lines. This was particularly apparent among the women I interviewed for this article. The primary self-identification through which women described their experiences around Beijing was as African American or Asian American, Latina, or indigenous women even when their political work was located in a broader context and they had gone to the conference as part of a multiethnic team. The term "women of color" was most easily embraced by African American women, but even they described their experiences primarily through the context of their own racial/ethnic identity. Indigenous women seemed the best organized constituency of women from the United States and articulated their concerns and issues differently from other women of color.

Alice Cardona was dissatisfied with the term "women of color." She said the term came from African American women's attempt to be more inclusive but that it failed to reflect the social context of different communities. Cardona's group, the National Latina Caucus, went to Beijing as Latinas, an identity they used primarily to disassociate from white women who were perceived as imperialist or insensitive. For Cardona, the issue of identity is "a question of community consciousness and not of color."

An interesting phenomenon in Beijing was the contrast between the power of Asian women's movements in the regions compared with the relative marginalization of Asian American women in the United States. Person after person commented on the strength, diversity, and leadership of women's movements in India, the Philippines, Japan, and other parts of Asia. According to Loretta Ross, Asian women were the best organized force in Beijing; she wondered what impact this would have on Asian American women in the United States. Although the visibility of Asian women was affirming for Peggy Saika, it also reinforced the fragility of Asian American women and their inability to be front and center in the U.S. political scene.

Efforts to bring together different communities of women of color for pre-conference organizing were limited to local and regional initiatives, with the exception of the U.S. indigenous women. Indigenous women in the United States met systematically for nine months and produced an eighty-page document that reflected the feedback, input, and writing of women from around the country. In Beijing, this document became the North American contribution to a global indigenous women's statement of their concerns. Although African American, Latina, and Asian American women also drafted their own statements in Beijing, the statement by indigenous women was the most comprehensive.

Although they were the best organized as a group, indigenous women did not fully identify as "women of color." As Ingrid Washinawatok described it, for indige-

nous women, solidarity with other women of color in the United States is complicated by the reality that women of color are just as much interlopers on Native people's lands as are white people. Communities of color and immigrant communities are often disrespectful of indigenous peoples; share the same value systems as white people in terms of acquisition of wealth, resources, and power; and can be as insensitive to the needs of indigenous peoples. Thus, the concerns of other women of color conflict with or differ from indigenous women's struggles around self-determination, land, sovereignty, and survival. In Beijing, therefore, the primary focus of U.S. indigenous women was to meet indigenous peoples from around the world and to build an international network. This network will act across common issues of nuclear waste, land rights, and sovereignty issues and to monitor actions at the United Nations which affect indigenous peoples. Alliances with other women of color were useful in certain contexts, but indigenous women did not feel that they always fit into the general agenda of women of color.

Transforming Consciousness into Action

All the women I spoke with described a profound shift in their consciousness post-Beijing. Almost all shared the same vision for future social change organizing, but few have been able to make these ideas concrete. According to Rinku Sen, women have developed a new language describing themselves and their work, but this has not yet changed day-to-day organizing. It has also been difficult for women who were in Beijing to share their experiences adequately with women who did not attend the conference.

Despite the challenges, the common themes articulated by those who went to Beijing provide a shared basis for action. Many women urged increasing the focus on community organizing and base building. Their first priority was organizing within their own ethnic communities. Alice Cardona articulated the need to refocus on one's own community and then connect with other women of color to coalesce around clear goals. Similarly, Peggy Saika described her efforts to build an Asian American and Pacific Islander women's movement that shifted the focus from service-oriented organizations to base-building and advocacy groups. All these women described plans for national post-Beijing meetings of their particular identity groups. They also felt more opportunities to meet across issue and identity lines were crucial, and they called for better international networking and global connections.

Opportunities Lost and Found

Beijing provided women of color with singular opportunities to catapult themselves into leadership within organizations in the United States—opportunities that have not been realized. On the other hand, the energy and excitement of those who went continues to provide hope that new directions will emerge in the organizing of women of color.

Women of color were unable to utilize the pre-Beijing process to build a national movement or network when such a network was critical. Hundreds of meetings and conferences took place prior to Beijing (including ten regional meetings convened by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor); yet few attempted to share agendas, goals, ideas, and strategies to develop concerted plans of action. The energy that took women to Beijing did not get transformed into a powerful voice for the human rights of women of color.

Moreover, women of color did not understand the importance of the Beijing Platform for Action as a tool to influence public policy in the United States. The Platform for Action was negotiated by approximately 181 governments, including our own, to reflect the commitments of UN member countries to half the world's population. Although women globally were involved in regional and UN efforts to lobby their governments and establish themselves as players in their own public policy processes, few U.S. women of color even realized that the Beijing conference comprised an official governmental conference as well as an NGO Forum. Because of their lack of preparation, it was difficult for women of color in Beijing to represent their interests adequately or affect the process. Again, the one exception was the indigenous women's caucus. However, their efforts at influencing the Platform would have benefited from a strong and powerful lobby by women of color who had agreed to shared goals.

Despite these missed opportunities, the excitement and energy that Beijing has generated provides the possibility of forging stronger directions, coalitions, agendas, and movements of women of color to address the present political climate. However, some important shifts in consciousness are necessary before such a possibility is realized.

Although women of color must focus on their own ethnic communities in order to build strong bases for political action, it is also critical that they begin to provide much-needed national leadership that crosses ethnic and identity lines. U.S. women's movements today are suffering from an acute crisis in leadership, vision, and direction. Women of color who are local leaders must develop and share their critical lessons, strategies, and analyses with a wider constituency of people. If women of color continue only to define themselves in the context of their communities, they perpetuate the problem of white women being perceived as national leaders while women of color are seen only as speaking for their own particular ethnicity or concern. It is important that leadership be assumed out of a sense of accountability and responsibility, but it is also important that marginalized communities understand their power as well as their victimization.

Women from other parts of the world demonstrated the potential to speak as leaders while articulating a complex analysis of their exploitation and oppression. Women of color returned from Beijing with pride and affirmation, which should provide the basis for moving from margin to center in a way that redefines the world. Our ability to build a true democracy that values and protects the human rights of all its constituents hangs in the balance.