

The Hindu

Date:03/04/2005

URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2005/04/03/stories/2005040300330300.htm>

Spaces and hopes

The recent special session in New York, of the Commission on the Status of Women revealed the extent to which those working for women's advancement wanted the U.N.'s space. DEVAKI JAIN writes.

THE Commission on the Status of Women had a special session in New York in March as a reminder or as a benchmark of many kinds. The first was to note that 10 years had passed since the last U.N. World Conference was held in Beijing in 1995. So at times it was "Beijing + 10". It also tried to note that 30 years had passed since the first World Conference of the U.N. on Women, held in Mexico in 1975. That conference is often seen as the beginning of an organised, rather widespread multi-dimensional international women's lobby.

The event, which was attended by 7,000 people from around the world, was called a special session. Therefore, the Commission on the Status of Women, itself supported by the Division for the Advancement of Women at the U.N., had organised several events.

Several strong messages emerged or characteristics were noticeable. First, the undaunted enthusiasm of women from the world to find a space for meeting each other. I say undaunted, as it was not easy for civil society representatives to find ways of not only coming to New York, but staying there.

The second was their deep commitment to U.N. spaces, as the only ones where the transnational connection in level playing fields, and some kind of affirmation of the political presence and identity and power of women could be made.

The third noticeable feature was the almost unified concern about not only the unipolarity of global power, but its viciousness, its conservatism and its overarching indifference to economic and social justice. There was a tangible unity in this regard across the boundaries of government, non-government and also within the U.N.

A vivid example of the solidarity was the way in which the conference ensured that a paragraph that the U.S. government had wanted to introduce into the Declaration — a paragraph which objected to the inclusion of the reproductive rights of women, was withdrawn because of the overwhelming united pressure of a combination not only of many of the official delegations, but also of the American women's lobby at the conference.

It was moving to see women from the United States, visibly self-conscious of the total lack of international morality of the government of their country. Since most speakers finger pointed at the U.S. for much of the difficulties that they were facing, they went through the hard experience of being the "guilty".

Wangari Matthai

A vivid presence at the conference was the Nobel Laureate Wangari Matthai accessible, modest, clear headed and beautiful — who called attention to the links between her grass root

movement, the planting of trees, as calling attention to the need to be more involved in the conservation of natural resources. She went further to point out that it is unequal access to natural resources along with the depletion of natural resources that was basically the cause of the little and the big wars. In other words, again, the link between peace and natural resources.

The third link she made was between the availability of natural resources and women's basic needs, i.e. the items that were crucial in women's domain, however stereotyped it might be. Thus the shortage of water directly added to the burden of women.

In drawing attention to conflict, she went quite deep in saying that even the Iraq war amongst others like the local wars in Congo and Angola was all for the sake of access and domination over natural resources. Therefore, by attending to natural resources from local to global, we were actually fulfilling the vision of women, namely for a peaceful world.

That this attention to peace was something that was one of the basic tenets of feminist solidarity over centuries was also brought to our attention by Helvi Sippila who almost upbraided the congregation for having removed peace from its centrality in the earlier women's agenda. So there was the important idea wrapping up both past and future plus local to a global connection.

Finally in a subtle way, Wangari related the parable of the humming bird, which picked up just drops of water from a river and tried to put out a very large forest fire, and when ridiculed by the rest of the animals who had fled, said, "I am doing what I can do." Wangari smiled and said, "and may be if we do what we can do, we can even put out the Bush fire!"

The conference discussed the employment consequences of trade-led growth accompanied by enthusiastic regional economic cooperation in the South countries. While understanding that these clubs are to bring South economic strength, almost as a counter to North economic clubs, particularly the EU and the G-8 and the configurations at the WTO, they had some particular distresses for women: On the one hand they had a greater demand for female labour than male, but on the other the working conditions and wage securities were dreadful. A representative of the World Bank was audacious enough to state that the Chinese one-child norm, had now presented a problem to the fast growing Chinese economy which needed female labour.

It was also pointed out that reform had moved the Chinese economy from formal to informal, in the sense that now, wages were not regularly paid to employees of small work shops where production was put out by multi nationals, and there was no legal framework for workers to claim their wages. Informalisation of contracts, of the whole system of production and trade, had made workers acutely vulnerable.

One more suggestion or thought that seemed to emerge, which I heard both at the macro-economic dialogue that DAW (the official Division for the Advancement of Women had as well as at some of the side-events) was the importance of a South only set of discussions which redefined the agenda of the women from the South regions. The forthcoming inter-ministerial meeting on women to be hosted in Malaysia, the current chair of the Non Aligned Movement, seemed to offer that opportunity.

The desire to want a space of their own for the women of the south to define an agenda was as not one of those trivial differences of looking at moving away from rights or from sexual orientation discourse. Rather, it was more in terms of looking at the big issues like the burden

of debt, the lack of a base of social insurance in these countries. The basic issue of disparities, the major disparity being between the rich and the developing countries was a tangible flaw in trying to lift women out of deep deprivation.

The fact that even though it was not a U.N. World Conference (7,000 women had gathered for what was nothing more than a Commission on the Status of Women meeting) revealed the hunger with which those working for women's advancement clung to the U.N.'s space. As Amartya Sen has said, "the United Nations is often separated out these days for particular chastisement for being ineffective (or worse), the U.N. and the intellectual and political movements associated with it have contributed greatly to making our world a bit less nasty and more liveable." And even though women had to fight to be heard and to influence the making and working of this grand institution, the constructive impact of women's ideas and leadership can be seen in nearly every field in which the U.N. has made significant contributions.

Herein lies the significance of this conference.