

# Integrating Sectors in the Platform for Action:

by Dorothy Goldin  
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*L'auteure place la Conférence de Beijing sur un continuum de transformation féministe qui défie la violence dominante*

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*The military is, in fact, the single largest polluter and waster of resources in the world. It is estimated that ten to thirty per cent of all global environmental degradation is due to military related activity.*



*des organismes militaires, corporatifs et gouvernementaux. Elle démontre comment les femmes du monde entier discutent de l'impact du militarisme sur l'environnement et la santé.*

As a participant at the End of the Decade Conference for Women (Nairobi 1985) as well as other United Nations (UN) and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forums over the years, I view the Beijing Conference as part of a feminist transformative continuum challenging structures of power and domination in the building of a just, peaceful, and ecologically sound world. My principle focus at the Conference was education and advocacy, linking the issues of militarism/peace/justice, environment, and health. It was evident that women worldwide are increasingly addressing the relationship between these sectors because of the rise in environmentally linked illnesses (especially breast cancer,<sup>1</sup> as well as other diseases of the reproductive, immune, and endocrine systems). This article examines the importance of integrating these sectors in women's praxis—sectors which are still often dealt with separately in both NGO and UN discourse<sup>2</sup> although this is beginning to change.

**The relationship between peace, health, and ecology**

Since World War II military strategists have developed chemical agents to destroy jungles, biological warfare to attack the reproductive, immune, respiratory, and central nervous systems of all living things, as well as thermonuclear devices of mega-death proportions. The waste spinoff of these destructive forces has spawned

a global health and environmental crisis in both the military and civilian corporate spheres. The use of carcinogens, hormone mimickers, toxic chemicals, radionuclides, pesticides, dioxins, furans, and products of vehicle exhausts, as well as the lack of government, corporate, and military accountability, has resulted in acid rain, ozone depletion, climate change, loss of topsoil, forest destruction, desertification, and increased radiation exposure etc. These combined "ecopathologies" have caused the extinction of species, increases in the rates of cancer, allergies, asthma, and an extraordinary degree of congenital birth defects, leading to increased poverty, urbanization, and a rise in the number of environmental refugees (Bertell 1992).

As the twentieth century draws to a close, the impact of militarization on the environment and on health will become more severe:

It is predicted that by the year 2000, weapons-related environmental radiation will produce 90,000 cases of cancer, two million miscarriages and infant deaths, 10.4 million children with genetic diseases, and another 10 million who are physi-

cally deformed or mentally retarded. (Bertell 1993)

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War is the ultimate and most deadly form of pollution. It claims as its victims men, women, children, soldiers, and civilians alike, animals and plant life, the fruits of civilization, and our precious natural systems and resources. It pollutes our air, water, soil, and food and undermines the worldwide efforts now under way to overcome the global environment/development crisis, the worst in human history. (*Women's Foreign Policy Bulletin*)

Of note is the fact that Canada is the largest exporter of uranium in the world, much of it going to nuclear weapons nations, thus contributing to the nuclear arms race, radioactive contamination, and its adverse affects on communities around the world (John 19).

Government and non-government praxis relating to issues of militarism, ecology, and health frequently address each of these sectors separately. For example, health sectors usually concentrate on health services and programs to women, HIV prevention, reproductive rights, poverty, etc. but rarely on primary prevention techniques and methodology related to the impact of environmental degradation. Ecology sectors usually concentrate on climate change, ozone depletion, deforestation, women's resource management, environmentally sound technologies, and consumer and science education. Militarism/peace/justice sectors usually fo-

# Relationships for Feminist Action

cus on the devastating impact of war on women, rape and other human rights abuses, halting arms sales, the need for non-violent conflict resolution, and the promotion of more women in decision-making. Of course all these components demand advocacy but there is need for greater integration within and among them which is what groups such as Voice of Women (VOW) and Women for a Just and Healthy Planet (WJHP) asked of their delegations prior to and in Beijing.

VOW and WJHP, in fact, challenged military/corporate polluting practices by promoting the 1994 International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes Report calling for "zero discharge" of persistent toxic chemicals including "radionuclides" and the principal of "reverse onus," meaning the polluter must prove that the chemical introduced is safe. They demanded that the principle of "reverse onus" also be applied to military activities which have never had to undergo environmental assessments.

## Learning and advocacy

At the Forum, many NGOs reflected on principles of ecological integrity enunciated at the first UN Conference on the Environment (Stockholm, 1972) and reiterated at many fora since: that the health of the planet is the primary context for the health of all life on it; that the life support systems of the earth are severely threatened; and that what we do to the planet, we are doing to ourselves. This awareness continued throughout the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) and beyond. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) directly addressed the issues raised at the 1991 Miami pre-UNCED meeting, organized by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), which resulted in

the development of the Women's Action Agenda 21—a document linking conflict, violence, environmental degradation, diseases, poverty, sexual exploitation, rising fundamentalism, lack of political power to a global economic system that subordinates the earth and human well-being to corporate growth.

Since UNCED '92, coalitions of peace, health, environment, breast cancer activists, women's groups, labour, scientists etc., have been working to halt military/environmental destruction and contamination causing deleterious health and ecosystem effects. Participants at the Population and Development Conference (Cairo, 1994), the Social Summit (Copenhagen, 1995), and the VOW Women and Peace Conference held in Toronto (June 1994), as well as at other pre-Beijing regional conferences continued to examine the links between militarism, the environment, and health also in the context of power relationships and domination.

In China, seminars, workshops, demonstrations, concerts, speeches, poetry, songs, and posters made explicit the links between violence

for the marginalized must entail struggles for equality, justice, and human rights for all peoples as well as calling for an end to ecological destruction, imperialism, racism, and class oppression. Most of the women engaged in these issues understood the necessity of challenging powerful corporate greed where a few profit personally, professionally, and financially by maintaining the status quo.

The need for justice and peace was particularly emphasized by women of Africa and Asia who have experienced decades of military dictatorships, war, rape, economic and other forms of violence, and ecological destruction. They called for a halt to arms exports, French and Chinese nuclear weapons testing, for widespread peace education, for non-violent conflict resolution, and for ecological restoration. Land mines continue to be a problem long after wars are over. Not only do the mines continue to maim and kill, but, as they are too dangerous to remove, they inhibit agriculture where farming had been the main source of sustenance.

The "Environmental Links to Women's Cancers," a panel of United

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against women and the degradation of the environment and militarization, between structural adjustment and debt crises, between wasteful consumption and the right of women to decide policy. Race, class, culture, and gender framed the discourse of analysis. Advocacy was promoted with an understanding that compassion

States, Maltese, United Kingdom, Malaysian, and Guyanese scientists focused on the scientific identification of pathways by which nuclear radiation and synthetic chemicals contribute to stimulating cancers unique to women, particularly breast cancer. At the WEED Foundation's "Women's Network on Health and the Environ-

ment" workshop, which included women from China, Russia, Turkey, Chile, Papua New Guinea, and the United States, the reluctance of the cancer establishment/industry with their vested interests in pharmaceutical companies and biomedical/technological models to seriously deal with environmental toxins and primary prevention was cited as a major barrier.

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Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) organized programs on women's health, methods of practical, clean production of consumer goods and services, and a fashion show with clothes which were reusable, recyclable, and made from non-toxic materials. The Eastern European Women's Caucus Working Group on Health and the Environment proposed alternatives such as affordable organic food, forms of safe energy production, systemic changes in production, consumption, and waste, education of doctors and other health professionals on impacts of toxins, the need for alternative as well as mainstream health care, a ban on public advertising of pharmaceuticals, the labelling of irradiated and genetically manipulated organisms, and the application of "the precautionary principle"<sup>3</sup> to all products introduced in their countries.

Winona LaDuke, Co-chair of the Indigenous Women's Network and Program Director of the Environmental Program at the Seventh Generation Fund, reminded women of the impacts of modernization on Native communities noting that wasteful consumption models in the industrialized world cause commodification of the sacred, the natural

world, cultures, women, and children. She noted that Canada has the highest per capita energy consumption in the world (OECD 136). Such levels of consumption drive the destruction of the world's forests, the production of nuclear wastes, PCBs, dioxin, and other lethal chemicals which devastate the planet and our own bodies. According to LaDuke, unless industrialized countries seriously reduce such

levels of consumption and subsequently the exports of these technologies, there will never be security for Indigenous or other women on this planet:

For it is not frankly that the women in the dominant society in the so called first world countries should have equal pay and equal status, if that pay and status continue to be based on a consumption model which is not only unsustainable but causes constant violation of women and nations everywhere in the world.

One action linking environment, militarism, and health had widespread implications. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which promotes and regulates nuclear technology, as a UN agency (like the World Health Organization), is present at all UN Conferences promoting nuclear technology.<sup>4</sup> For the Beijing Conference it produced a beautiful poster: "Women creating peace and development through nuclear technology" and attempted to recruit women to work in the nuclear industry. A press conference, quickly organized by Jennifer Ramsey (of VOW) and myself attracted the attention of the international media. The press release announced: "Environmental and Peace Groups at the Fourth World Conference on Women are Appalled at the Arrogance of the Nuclear Industry" and specified:

For ecological/safe energy groups, peace and environmental justice organizations, nuclear technology means *bombs, radiation, cancer, and environmental racism*. The nuclear fuel chain is fraught with radioactive emissions which are dangerous to health and the environment, and are directly and indirectly connected to nuclear weapons proliferation. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl have made it clear that there are no safe levels of radiation. To present nuclear power as "Atoms for Peace" and "Expanding the Contribution of Women to Development and Peace" is a blatant contradiction which misappropriates the language and themes of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Aboriginal women and marginalized people everywhere have been victims of toxic and radioactive facilities and waste depositories since the nuclear age began some 60 years ago.

It furthermore contrasted the negative health impacts of nuclear power with safe energy alternatives and commented on the inappropriateness of the IAEA recruiting women at a meeting committed to peace. At the press conference outside the recruitment room, women from the Philippines, the UK, Canada, Germany, the United States, Africa, Japan, described nuclear/health problems in their respective countries.<sup>5</sup>

The Beijing Conference illustrated that feminism, peace/justice, and health/environmentalism are powerful social movements where the vision and promise is the possibility that personal interactions and institutional arrangements can be transformed into non-exploitative, non-hierarchical, cooperative relationships on a healthy planet. All are progressive movements challenging mainstream standards and seeking to reorder private and public priorities, often with overlapping areas of interest (Seager).

## Conclusion

The Beijing Forum is part of a feminist transformative continuum where learning and advocacy regarding the links between militarism, environment, and health are becoming more visible. Despite overwhelming obstacles, there were positive signs that women's leadership on these issues is growing around the world. Courage abounds as seen in the examples of Innu women in Sheshshit, Labrador attempting to stop low level flying, a display of Canadian environmental and military racism; the "Grandmothers" trying to stop uranium mining at Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, because of local and global impacts; the Chipko movement in India where women hug trees to stop bulldozers from cutting them down; the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya and other parts of Africa where women plant trees and grow food using biological agriculture methods. Women are learning to build communities with practical alternatives for a healthier future. The Beijing process provided a means for encouraging ecological/health, peace/justice integration in women's movements and indeed in the Platform for Action itself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Close to 17,700 women in Canada are diagnosed with breast cancer each year (Canadian Cancer Society 16).

<sup>2</sup>For the Fourth UN Conference on Women, Joan Russow (VOW) wrote a book, *The Global Compliance Research Project: Fifty Years of Obligations, Treaties, Conventions, Charters, Declarations, Resolutions*, which integrates many of the issues. It holds countries accountable to their UN commit-

ments. A copy was given to each delegation.

<sup>3</sup>The "precautionary principle" is one which insists that if any doubts about the safety of a project exist, then precautionary measures should be taken, irrespective of whether proof exists that the project or procedure is potentially harmful.

<sup>4</sup>IAEA representatives were present at UNCED '92, promoting nuclear energy as environmentally safe and at the 1985 Nairobi UN Conference on Women to assure that nuclear power was promoted in the UN FLS.

<sup>5</sup>A Canadian colleague reported seeing this press conference on CNN in Jamaica.

<sup>6</sup>See Strategic Objective K.3 Actions to be taken, (ii); and Agenda item 9, Report of the Main Committee, Paragraphs 246, 247, 258 (c).

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