

Stop Believing the Lies

Canadian Woman Demanding Accountability

by Kay Anonsen

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Women working for change, Peace Tent, ngo Forum 1995, Huairou.

Photo: Brenda Cranney

de la femme à Saint-Jean Terre-Neuve. C'est une vue d'ensemble de l'atmosphère qui régnait lors de la conférence et de l'impact que cette conférence a eu sur certaines d'entre-nous.

The United Nations just held its Fourth World Conference on Women last August in Beijing and Huairou, China, and I got to go. Yes, I did. And like any worthy feminist, I felt guilty about that. When anyone comes up to me and says; "oh you went to China?" I feel a little twinge of "yeah, I did, even though there were probably women much worthier than me, much more deserving than me, unfortunately yeah it was me who got the proposal in on time, and agreed to do all the work after. Yeah, it was me."

Now attending a world conference on women had a great impact on me as I'm sure it did on all the women who went, and the ridiculous spattering of men who were there too. But on top of trying to assimilate everything that was happening at the Conference, I also had to assimilate the fact that I was in China, and let me tell you, waking up in the morning and finding yourself in China has a bit of an impact on you too!

There are nine million people in the city of Beijing, more than in New York, and everyone is Chinese. In fact, we learned that China is made up of many different

cultures and races which were forced into a similarity and uniformity that denied their cultural differences, their unique language and dialects, or any kind of distinctness. This must have been a terrible hardship on the women of China, because women are the holders of a cultural uniqueness. Who teaches children how to function in our society? Who teaches children the folk tales and songs, the rhymes and mythology? It is women. And how difficult it must have been for these women to conform to a dominant culture and deny their children their own background, their own history.

To a certain extent, this is happening in Newfoundland. Although there is no army to enforce it, the realities of the economy certainly do. The best way to get a job is to look, dress, and sound like a mainlander. Remember when Tom Rideout was Premier of Newfoundland for nine days? Now I had a lot of concerns about Tom Rideout, but his accent wasn't one of them. But it was for many people. Would he be able to

handle himself at Rideau Hall they wondered? Would he know what fork to use? His accent is so strong, would people laugh? One of the main Canadian banks decided not to place its 1-800 service in Newfoundland because our accents are too strong.


This is something we have in common with Chinese women. We are responsible for maintaining the characteristics of our culture, and we will be as saddened when we see our children lose what defines us as Newfoundlanders, as the Chinese women must have been when their children lost what made them Semang, or Andaman, or Veddoid.

The more I continued to wake up in China, the more the realities of women's lives there didn't seem that different from ours here. In alleyways, men sat in lawn chairs, reading the paper and chatting, while women tried to cook over a hot flame with children hovering and scampering around them. I looked into these women's faces; they looked tired, harried, and stressed. I looked into the faces of the men in their lawn chairs; they looked relaxed, complacent, serene. Remind you of anything?

But the biggest things we have in common are the great big lies we've been told. I received a lot of propaganda when I first arrived in China, distributed by the Chinese government, extolling their virtues when it came to the

status of women in their country. Oh yes, why there was a picture of—count them—why there must be ten women being educated, oh, and a picture of a woman smiling on her way to her medical exam where she'll be checked to make sure she hasn't got a forbidden second pregnancy. The Chinese government tells us women like the one child policy. They like it because they know it is good for China. Well, we don't have a one-child policy here, but notice how we're being talked into letting the children go hungry and cold, for the good of the country, with not enough warm clothes or decent footwear. Why? Because there's a

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deficit in the country, and everyone has to suffer so we can balance our budget. But is everyone suffering? I don't think so. I see their faces in the paper, Michael Harris, Premier of Ontario, and our very own homegrown version, Paul Dicks, Head of the Newfoundland Treasury Board, and they don't look like they suffer personally. They don't look like they're going without adequate footwear, like the children are. They don't look like they're going hungry, like the children are.

During the cultural revolution, women in China were told they are important because they hold up half the sky. One afternoon, I got off the bus that I took from Huairou to Beijing and back every day during the two-week conference and hauled my bedraggled, soaking body up to my hotel room and sat down with a cold Tsin Tsau and turned on the English language news to see what kind of press we were getting. And there was a very vibrant, older Chinese woman telling the world about a lie she was told. She said they were told they were important because they were holding up half the sky. But that was said just to make them leave their communities and families to work in factories for low pay and very poor working conditions. She was told her suffering was for the good of China, and when China got strong, her suffering and hard work would pay off. Now she says that was a lie to make her work, and she has stopped believing the lies the revolution told to women. And she ended the interview with: "if women hold up half the sky, then women should own half the sky."

I'm following that woman's lead, and I've decided to stop believing the lies. That is the next challenge for women in Canada. We have to do what women like Theresa Mackenzie, a feminist activist who writes for the *St. John's Evening Telegram*, and Elaine Price, head of the Federation of Labour, are doing—exposing the lie. When Gerry Colbert, the spokesperson for Newfoundland Power

said they had to raise electricity rates in order to maintain their competitive edge, Theresa asked; "What competition—you're a monopoly." Elaine Price exposed the lies of the federal government about how expensive the Unemployment Insurance (UI) system is. This system is funded by the employer and employee. Funny how they forget to mention that. Funny how few people know that the UI fund is not funded by taxpayers. So who's trying to dismantle it? Maybe the employers who don't want to pay their contributions. Well, they don't pay their taxes, so you can imagine how galling it is for them to pay their UI contributions.

Speaking of paying and not paying, child support payments will no longer be taxed. That's great news. Of course there won't be a tax deduction either so a lot of men won't pay if there isn't anything in it for them. Ah, the tax system and women! Can you imagine men arguing with us, looking us straight in the face and saying that daycare is not a legitimate business expense. This from those who consider feeding themselves one. Go figure. Of course they care for their children very much. And they also care for us. Next time they're in an airplane maybe they can yell down to us from business class. Hey you in steerage, we care very deeply.

You know, the spirit of women should have been crushed years ago. It should have been crushed after the witch burnings. Or after any one of the wars that civilization so charmingly developed. But our spirit hasn't been crushed. You should have seen the faces on the men around Huairou and in Huairou who watched us with such fascination during the two weeks of the Conference. And the media too. They were expecting to see the oppressed, the hated, the poor, the unwell. I really think they were expecting to see a bunch of miserable women shuffling around the wretched weather conditions—there are two weather options in Beijing, freezing rain or oppressive humidity—wading through mud, and looking around bewildered at the bizarre layout of the Conference. I think they were expecting some broken spirits there; some misery.

But you know what we were doing? We were dancing. We were clapping our hands. We were singing. We were marching. We were talking to each other with great animation and excitement. We were meeting. We were making plans and coming up with new strategies. We were raising banners: "Equal political participation now"; "Lesbian rights are human rights"; "No more Hiroshima. No more Nagasaki." We were shouting: "End violence against women now." And you know that has a powerful ring to it when 10,000 women are shouting it at the top of their lungs. We formed coalitions. We took down each others' addresses. The men watching us from town were surprised I'm sure to see such joyous and excited women traipsing through the rain and the mud. It frightened them. It disappointed them. And that is the way out. Working together and never letting the buggers wear you down.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women the Cana-

dian government made a lot of promises to Canadian women. If you want to know what those promises are write the Status of Women Canada, or the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women, or the Women's Policy office. Ask them for a copy of the Platform for Action, the document of promises all governments made to women. Look at the commitments that have been made and write Hedy Fry, the Canadian Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, and ask her what's being done in Canada now that the Conference is over. Don't expect a very clear answer. After all the government has learned

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that it is easy to promise, and then forget about it. Look at the National Child Care Strategy promised in 1988, 1995, and cancelled once more in 1996. And how do you like the reply I got when I wrote and asked what Canada was doing after Beijing. "Currently, we are establishing interdepartmental mechanisms to coordinate the implementations of the documents." I wonder what that is and I wonder how long it will take. I guess they figure if they hem and haw long enough, we'll forget about it.

Well, I'm not forgetting about this one. Remember that proposal I told you about earlier? Yeah, I'm on their case. And there's a lot of women in Canada who are taking this on like a dog with a bone. If you're interested in the work we are doing to keep the Canadian government accountable to the promises it made in Beijing, call me at the Advisory Council, or keep up to date with our newsletter which is free and which I'm writing in regularly now about the follow-up to Beijing.

And to all women, whether you are from our unions, our banks, our governments, schools, women's organizations, or wherever, I thank you for all the work you are doing to make this a better place for women. And picture if you will, the bank teller in Japan who is on the board of directors for a new shelter for battered women refugees because she wants to rectify the damage done by her country to these women. And think of the school teacher in New Zealand who is fighting for equal opportunities for girls in education. If you work in a women's organization, think of the women working in similar organizations all over the world, who came up to me hungry for information from Canada on how to form and maintain grass-roots organizations and how to effectively lobby elected officials.

We have a lot of battles left to fight. The status of women in Canada is no where near the status of men. We know as feminists we need to speak out on the issues. But

the issues are so many and so complex, we don't know which to take on or where to begin. Should it be freedom of choice, cuts to social programs, layoffs, gun-control legislation, the Board of Trade, the Economic Recovery Commission, the Churches' stand on education reform, human rights for lesbians and gays, sentencing for offenders of sexual assault cases, judges and their comments, demand for equal representation in the House of Assembly, more money for women's centres and shelters, plus not everyone can get into the Price Club!

So here's to another year of lobbying, fighting, and striving to make the world a better place for women. And with the seven newly elected women to the Newfoundland House of Assembly, hopefully we won't have to fight so hard on the outside.

I must admit a personal goal I have is to attain the status the women in Juchitan, Mexico have. This I read about in Gloria Steneim's new book, *Moving Beyond Words: A* traffic cop there was asked why he blocked a busy intersection as a strapping Juchitan woman came bobbing along with a case of beer balanced on her head. "It is a mistake to get in a woman's way," he said, "especially if she's headed for a party."

This speech was presented at the Bread and Roses Luncheon in St. John's on International Women's Day, March 8, 1996.

Until the recent provincial government cuts in Newfoundland, Kay Anonsen was the Executive Director of the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women, St John's, Newfoundland. She is a member of the Newfoundland/Beijing Committee which is co-leading the post-Beijing work on violence. Currently, is co-writing a play called Feminists.



Participants, ngo Forum 1995.

Photo: Brenda Cranney