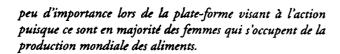
# Putting Agriculture on the Agenda

# Representing Farm Women in Beijing

## by Karen Pedersen

L'auteure examine les préoccupations des fermières du Canada et du monde entier. Elle se demande pourquoi la production des aliments et les questions liées à l'agriculture ont revêtu si

Where our food comes from and how it is produced should have been an integral part of the themes addressed at the Conference, in particular its impact on the economy, the environment, women's health, and youth.



Agriculture was not even mentioned in the Canadian submission to the UN Conference on Women. Therefore, it is not surprising that agriculture was only mentioned twice throughout the original draft Platform for Action. I felt it was important that if we were going to talk about women's equality that we talk about all women equally. I went to Beijing to put agriculture on the agenda.

I participated at the NGO Forum in Huairou as Youth President of the National Farmers' Union. I left my honey farm during harvest to represent farmers across Canada who could not leave. I went to make sure the voices of all the women working on and off the farm would be heard.

"In developing countries, they [women] produce, process, and market up to 80 per cent of the food" (Status of Women Canada 66), yet, in Beijing, agriculture was not considered a women's issue. Where our food comes from and how it is produced should have been an integral part of the themes addressed at the Conference, in particular its impact on the economy, the environment, women's health, and youth.

The Women, Food, and Agriculture Working Group (WFA) was formed specifically to make agriculture an integral part of the Platform for Action. It was an international group that collectively made decisions, held workshops, and lobbied delegates. By not covering the workshops organized by the Women, Food, and Agriculture Working Group and other such groups, the media missed the most important happenings in Beijing. In one workshop sponsored by Philippine women, the media would have seen 100 or more women huddled under a small canopy tent, with those standing on the outside edges soaked by the pouring rain. In other workshops where the

organizers did not show up, women on the floor took over, making the workshop a forum for all. None of the women would leave because as they shared the stories of their own lives, they discovered common elements whether they were from developing or industrialized countries.

Agriculture is becoming agribusiness. As food production is being changed into a commodity-focussed business, those who grow and eat the food are being hurt. Food is being grown where it is cheapest, regardless of detriment to the land or to the people who produce and consume it.

Corporations who move food commodities around the world can only afford to do so if they are paying low commodity prices while charging high consumer prices. While commodity prices fluctuate, corporations continue to skim profits off the top as producers average a price below their cost of production. Most food commodities are sold while prices are low because producers need the money to pay bills. When the prices go up there is little commodity left to be sold, yet consumer prices are raised to pay for supposedly higher commodity costs.

Land ownership is a problem for many women. Many countries do not allow women to own land, even though they are the producers of food on that land. In countries where the laws do allow women to own land other factors make ownership impossible. The cost of land is usually high due to tourism, industry, or inflated prices. Credit is difficult to attain. For those that do attain credit, a situation like the one that exists in Canada is likely to arise. The first generation finally finishes paying off their loans on the land just prior to retirement. To be able to retire they must sell their land to the next generation who then spend the rest of their lives paying the debt until it is transferred once again. In reality, the producer never owns the land.

Once a producer has land to grow food on, what to produce and how to produce that food become the next questions. Often producers are limited in their choices because of the need for ready cash. Globalization pressures them to grow "cash" crops such as cotton, canary seed, coffee, bananas, wheat, and potatoes, which are not necessarily food nor good to the land. Keeping the balance sheet in mind, many producers abuse their land with excessive clearing and improper crop rotation. Growing only one or two specialized crops makes them prime targets for disease. Producers then become dependent on artificial fertilizers and chemicals in attempts to remedy the situation.

Developing countries need more technology. That can simply mean having the instructions for a chemical in their own language or the knowledge of which chemicals are banned in industrial countries. Industrialized countries have too much technology. Hybrid seeds in which yields outweigh disease resistance are common, requiring the use of more chemicals for production. Bigger equipment requires a larger land base to be efficient. Producers know which technologies best lend themselves to sustainable food production yet the balance book often has more weight during the decision making. For instance, artificial hormones such as recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) for dairy cows are being forced on producers. Much like chemical use, once multinational corporations like Monsanto have convinced governments to allow new



Karen Pederson (centre, first row) and other members of the Food and Agriculture Working Group.

technology like TBGH, the balance book pushes farmers into using the product to attain a competitive edge. Unfortunately, this creates a dependeance on the drug and that whole way of producing. Once farmers are hooked they have usually lost their competitive edge and do not have the capital to stop the dependance by switching the whole premise of their production. In the end, the cash crisis felt by farmers the world over requires more economic efficiencies and more technology, and therefore fewer farmers and less environmental protection.

Once the food is produced, farmers need to market and transport it. Long distances from markets make for high transportation costs. Cash crops are often moved internationally to a market that will pay the highest consumer price. There are only so many means of efficient transportation which makes producers captive shippers. Small pockets of producers, such as the banana producers in St. Lucia, are limited by both markets and transportation. Only one company will buy and transport their bananas so they must accept whatever price that company will give.

One wonders how producers survive at all. Many do not, which is why there is a mass exodus to urban areas. As

more people leave the farm, the small supporting communities die. In Canada many of the producers survive by working long hours both on and off the farm. In 1994, 55 per cent of Canadian farmers' income came from off-farm jobs (Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food). Unemployment rates rise as the exodus to urban areas continues and those that stay on the farms take urban jobs.

The women at the Conference discovered that many of their problems were shared internationally and therefore set to working on common solutions. Producers wanted co-operatives in many aspects of their operation. Working co-operatives would give them control in accessing credit, labour, information, and sharing costs. They wanted land restructuring laws for public ownership of land which would allow access to women. They wanted a return on their labour and investment which would cover their costs of production. Orderly marketing, through supply management and single desk selling, was proposed as a means to eliminate the many transaction costs created by inefficiencies in the open market.

I found the solutions ironic as I sat and listened. We had already developed these structures in Canada. Many co-ops are currently in the process of being privatized. We have the Canadian Wheat Board and many other examples of orderly marketing. Yet Canadian producers' initiatives are being dismantled in the name of globalization and market freedom. The international trade agreements are destroying the structures that producers have created. Perhaps that was why the Canadian government did not want to tackle agriculture in Beijing. It would be difficult to defend signing two international agreements, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Platform for Action, with diametrically opposed principles.

Women left the workshops of the WFA organized and energized. They had more information and more contacts through which they could channel information. I was able to let people know about Via Campesina, a global movement of farmers' organizations. Through these workshops and the united effort of the WFA, agriculture was integrated into the document. It did not go far enough, but it was a big improvement from the two clauses in the original draft. We succeeded in having economic methods of food production recognized as an important aspect of people's nutrition and health, the environment, and the future of youth.

The Fourth UN Conference on Women is over. We, the participants, have a responsibility to continue the work of Beijing. We need to work towards ensuring governments do not ghettoize women's issues. That means they must be an integral part of any signed UN agreement. At the November 1996 International Food Security Conference in Rome, it is important that women be recognized as the majority of the world's producers and dealt with appropriately. It is also our responsibility to hold our governments accountable to the Platform for Action. This document will mean nothing if we do not force governments to live

up to their obligations. Finally, it is necessary that we bring home our enthusiasm as well as our knowledge from Beijing. We will only achieve equality if we are united and excited.

Karen Pedersen is a 22 year old honey producer from Cut Knife, Saskatchewan. She farms collectively on a small family farm with her extended family while acting as Youth President for the National Farmers' Union. In her two years as Youth President she has been responsible for organizing young farmers and ensuring young farmers' voices are heard on issues which affect them. Over the past several years she has had the opportunity to farm in the United States, Denmark, and Grenada, increasing her understanding of global agriculture.

<sup>1</sup>Supply management controls supply of the product so that producers and consumers are assured of a stabilized reasonable price with excellent quality. In Canada, eggs, poultry, and dairy are currently governed by supply management. If suppy management were lost the economy would suffer tremendously and the direct impact on consumer prices would only be a savings of \$0.50 per \$100 basket of goods (see Bromfield, Jenness, and Justus). <sup>2</sup>Single desk selling is the precept of all producers marketing their product collectively through one agency. This agency allows them to share the cost and risk of marketing and returns the profit from marketing their product to the producers. Organized into a large body, they have the power to ask for a higher price than they would receive on the open market. Without single desk selling, producers are price takers on the open market bearing all the risks individually while middlemen retain the profit. The Canadian Wheat Board is an example of single desk selling.

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#### **FAWZIA AHMAD**

### Choice?

I choose to educate today I choose? What is *choice* really? Choice comes with privilege It is not a choice It is not a clear choice for me Not to challenge racism I am brown If I do not challenge If I do not educate I drown I disappear I am silenced Then how could this really be a choice? When I do not speak out Against your racism Why is my silence taken as acceptance? How was my silence choice? When I do not challenge it is because I am tired Sick of it Frustrated Angry Numb No, I remain silent because I don't really have a choice I remain silent because You had a choice You chose to be silent Your silence condones my pain I am silent In disbelief My wounds are from choices that you made Choices that came from your privilege Choosing not to educate today Is my way The only way I know To survive So, tell me something Why do you choose not to educate today?

Fawzia Ahmad is a 30 something political Indian Trini woman. She is a front line rape crisis worker. Her passion is her family, her people, and food. Her work against ALL oppressions is ongoing.