

# Influencing the International Stage

## A Case Study of the Women's Caucus and the

by Joyce Brown

*L'auteure fait le point sur les travaux de collaboration de divers réseaux de femmes sur la scène locale, nationale et*

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*Women should be involved in every aspect of the planning and management of shelter schemes.*

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*internationale, et explique comment ceux-ci ont influencé les débats de la Conférence Habitat II et la Conférence des Nations Unies sur le Peuplement.*

Global United Nations (UN) Conferences encompass two relatively distinct events. One is an official conference which national governments attend to debate the contents of a major document which is to set priorities for action at the national and local levels. Ultimately most or all governments in attendance will sign the document, indicating their support for the policies and guidelines contained in it.

The other event is the non-governmental or NGO forum which is a venue for a variety of non-profit organizations, churches, and community groups from around the world to come together. The purpose of this gathering is to network, hold workshops and forums, form coalitions, and generally influence and educate one another. In addition, at the Habitat II Conference, there were other parallel activities organized such as special sessions for municipalities, universities, and planners.

Although all of these processes are important, I have concentrated on the official Conference as it was around this event that most of the women's organizing was focussed. A coalition of women's networks known as the Super-Coalition was formed prior to the Beijing Conference. It was active in Beijing, in the prepara-

tions leading up to the Habitat II Conference, and finally in Istanbul, at the Conference itself. The impact of women's groups on the Conference lobbying and on the official document, the "Habitat Agenda," was significant and should set a precedent for other work in the future.

### **United Nations work on women and human settlement issues**

Since women are most affected by social housing schemes and settlement projects, they should be involved in every aspect of the planning, decision-making, implementation, and management of shelter schemes. This has been emphasized in the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women," and in the "Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000."

International events such as the Habitat Conference draw attention to the shelter needs of women, and to some degree raise the consciousness of government officials and policy makers. The international community can then exert some pressure (albeit limited) upon national governments to amend their policies in accordance with international guidelines. When a government signs an international document such as the Habitat Agenda, this can be a step in bringing about national action.

### **Global networks working on women's housing issues**

Given the importance of highlighting women's housing needs and lobbying on the issues, international women's networks saw the usefulness of combining their efforts in preparation for Habitat II. The following section provides a very brief history of the major global networks involved in the Super-Coalition and

a description of their activities.

The idea for Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) originated at the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, as a result of discussions among women involved at the grassroots level around the world. In 1989, 20 grassroots women leaders from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Pacific, Europe, and North America came together to create GROOTS. The organization is involved in carrying out exchanges with other women's groups, organizing community development training programs, and lobbying national and international governments regarding grassroots women's issues.

Women and Shelter Network (WSN) of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) was formed in 1988 to work on women's shelter issues, to bring the concerns of women in poor communities to the attention of local and national governments, and to provide a gender perspective at HIC. It has forged a consultative relationship with the Women in Human Settlements Development Program of the United Nations Commission on Human Settlement (UNCHS) and is active in about 30 countries.

The International Council of Women (ICW), based in the Netherlands, is a group which has been in existence for over 100 years (since 1888). It addresses issues through its standing committees on arts, economics, habitat and environment, finance, international relations and peace, law, mass media, migration, social welfare, and aging. Although active primarily in Europe, it has connections worldwide.

The UNCHS (Habitat) Women in Human Settlements Development Program is based at the United Nations in Nairobi. It has been instrumental in drawing attention to the

# Habitat II Conference

issues of women and human settlement within the UN and in funding research and training projects which promote women's involvement in human settlement development. As a result of the work of the Program,

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UNCHS has published several studies and guides on women and human settlements. The Women's Environment and Development Organization was founded by the American activist Bella Abzug. WEDO became a strong lobbying force at the World Women's Conference for a Healthy Planet held in Miami in 1991. From there it went on to coordinate a Women's Caucus at five major UN Conferences (the Earth Summit in Rio; the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna; the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo; the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen; and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing). It not only coordinates lobbying but also provides a gender perspective on UN documents at these conferences. In addition, WEDO is involved in lobbying on environmental and development issues around the world.

Asia Women and Shelter Network (AWAS), formed in 1995, is the newest of these international networks. Its members represent local government, NGOs, and community-based organizations (CBOs) in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Its purpose is to bring attention to women's issues regarding human settlement, support women's community-based initiatives, and assist in lobbying and advocacy efforts at national levels.

## The development of the Super-Coalition

In March of 1995 Debbie O'Connell from Vancouver, and I, as representatives of GROOTS Canada, attended the Third Preparatory Meeting (PrepComm III) for the Beijing Conference, held in New York. It was our first experience at a UN gathering and initially it appeared that formulation of the conference document was a very complex and rather incomprehensible process.

It was at this meeting that the Super-Coalition was formed. Women's groups working on issues related to women and shelter realized that there was very little in the draft "Platform for Action" which addressed women's housing needs. GROOTS in conjunction with WSN, the ICW, and the Women in Human Settlements Development Program of UNCHS met prior to the beginning of PrepComm III to strategize regarding the introduction of these issues into the document. It was very late in the process to begin such lobbying as the major sections of the document had already been agreed upon and there was nothing on human settlement. Instead, those issues had to be subsumed under other headings dealing with poverty and rights. However, in part due to the last minute lobbying of the Super-Coalition, issues such as women's right to inheritance were included in the Beijing Platform for Action.

The meeting in New York provided a venue for women to get to know the participants in the various networks, before travelling to Beijing. This was a critical factor as the Super-Coalition became a point of connection for women once they reached Beijing. It was also an opportunity for many of us to begin to see how the official process worked, to see how lobbying could be done, and to become familiar with some of the offi-

cial government delegates from our own countries.

## The Fourth World Conference on Women and the Huairou Document

The Beijing Conference was an overwhelming experience—the sheer numbers of women, the huge array of workshops, plenary sessions, and displays, to say nothing of the adjustment to a different culture, jet lag, difficulties with transportation, and language barriers.

The GROOTS tent quickly became a home base for the Super-Coalition, providing a valuable space for workshops, meetings, and messages. Grassroots women connected with one another on a wide variety of issues. Although the official Conference and the NGO Forum were several miles apart (from one to one and a half hours by bus) there was an attempt made to have meetings in the GROOTS tent each day. Those attending the official conference came and shared information. Because it was too late to include much on shelter issues in the Platform for Action, a group of us

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decided that it was important to begin planning for the Habitat II Conference on Human Settlement—to ensure that women's issues were front and centre at the next UN Conference.

To this end, an international group met on a daily basis to put together ideas for both content and process at the Habitat Conference. Our group, the Women and Shelter Strategizing

Group (WSSG), formulated a document containing these ideas and priorities. Wally N'Dow, the Secretary General of the Habitat II Conference was in Beijing as were staff of the Women and Human Settlements Program of UNCHS. Because of the official staff support as well as existing connections between some members of GROOTS and Wally N'Dow, the Super-Coalition was able to organize two important events.

The first was a meeting with the Super-Coalition and Wally N'Dow in the GROOTS tent. The WSSG presented him with our paper, which later became known as the Huairou Document. It was well received and promises were made to use the document in guiding the Habitat process. The second event was an evening hosted by the Women and Human Settlements Program, with a guest panel of speakers including Wally N'Dow and women from WSN as well as GROOTS. This event was widely attended and solidified the earlier agreement in front of the press and many UN and government officials. These two occasions were strategically very important for establishing a profile for women and settlement issues and paving the way for work prior to Habitat II.

### **En route to Istanbul**

In Beijing, talks began between WEDO and the Super-Coalition about coordinating a Women's Caucus for Habitat. It was agreed that WEDO would join the Super-Coalition and take over this coordinating role. In the fall of 1995, WEDO sent women's groups around the world a copy of the draft Habitat Agenda and invited very specific line-by-line comment.

GROOTS Toronto decided to respond and spent a weekend reviewing the draft Agenda. Numerous groups suggested changes which were compiled into the Women's Caucus Document, a detailed critique of the Habitat Agenda.

As with other UN Conferences, there were several PrepComm meetings prior to the Istanbul Conference. The

Women's Caucus (which was open to all who wished to attend) met two days prior to the opening of the final PrepComm (III) held in New York in February 1996. The Caucus had an orientation and information session for newcomers to the UN process, and finalized a draft of the suggested changes to the Habitat Agenda.

This Women's Caucus document was then distributed to all of the governments in attendance in New York. It was the most comprehensive NGO document available and clearly useful to both NGOs and government delegates. This was a key factor in promoting the Women's Caucus amendments. The timing and availability of the material was critical. No other NGO grouping had their input available so early in the process. It was at this point that governments were seriously considering the wording of the Agenda and there was an opportunity to introduce new language and issues. Government delegations, such as Canada, Norway, the U.S., and countries in the E.U. used the Women's Caucus document as a guideline in formulating their own amendments, often incorporating entire sections. This is a clear indication of the success of the Caucus in reaching and influencing government delegations.

At the orientation process, the Women's Caucus also outlined lobbying strategies and set up morning and evening briefing sessions to keep all members of the Caucus informed about the negotiation of the Agenda. In the UN process, each paragraph is negotiated line-by-line. If all governments agree to wording at the PrepComms, then sections of the document are finalized before the official Conference. Only contentious sections, left in brackets, remain to be discussed.

The Super-Coalition obtained free space in the Turkish Mission across from the United Nations building in New York. It was a ground floor space with huge windows (in which there were signs announcing the Super-Coalition) and anyone entering or leaving the UN building was bound to notice it. Morning Caucus brief-

ings were held in the UN building in the auditorium which the government delegates then took over at 10:00 a.m. This not only gave the Caucus a high profile but also permitted women to interact with the delegates as the room changed hands. Debriefings were held each day at 6:00 p.m. in the space at the Turkish Mission. The debriefings became particularly popular with a wide range of people, and many men from NGOs as well as government delegates began attending. Presentations by Bella Abzug and others also drew numbers of people; thus the Women's Caucus quickly became well known.

Women were assigned to monitor different parts of the negotiations. At times the NGOs were permitted to intervene and speak to the UN assembly, however, most of the lobbying took place between individual NGOs and their government delegations.

### **Habitat II**

Like Beijing, Habitat II had two major events happening simultaneously—the Conference and the NGO Forum. However, in Istanbul the two were located approximately a ten-minute walk from each other, and it was much easier to maintain a connection between activities. (This had been one of the requests of WSSG.) A similar organizing process also took place. The Caucus met prior to the Conference in order to orient its members. There was a morning briefing session in the UN chambers and an evening debriefing session at the NGO Forum site. Once again the Women's Caucus was the most high-profile and organized of the many NGO caucuses.

Final negotiation on the text took place through two separate Committees. This process was extremely time consuming as all member nations could speak on each section (or even on each sentence) of the document if they chose to do so. However, countries tended to work in blocks and allowed one member to speak for them. The main blocks were: EU (The European Union); G77/China (The

developing nations which now number over 100 plus China); JUSCANZ (Japan, U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand); Arab Group (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Yemen, etc.); and the Holy See (The Vatican). NGOs were allowed to speak at intervals as permitted by the chair of the Committee. This was a major change from previ-

able when the official government sessions were held at night, which was the case during the final days of the Conference. This effectively eliminated the participation of a large number of government delegates and NGOs from some of the most critical negotiations. Cost was cited as the reason for the lack of translation but to most participants this was inexcusable.

Negotiations were slow and tedious. At times the meetings would be

recessed for hours with no clear indication of when they would reconvene. During the last days, they continued until 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning.

In spite of this, the Caucus was visible and active and came to be an accepted presence throughout negotiations.

Although there are no other UN conferences scheduled for this century, some very important precedents have been set regarding women's participation at world conferences. The Caucus had considerable influence on the wording of the Habitat Agenda and in mainstreaming gender throughout the document. It promoted the inclusion of language on disability; housing as a human right; shelter for people living in poverty; the rights of the homeless and refugees; and sustainable development.

The official Canadian negotiating team took a very active role at the Conference and kept Canadian members of the Caucus informed of their work through daily briefing sessions. Canada was influential in negotiating an agreement on housing as a

right and in introducing new sections on gender and disability issues.

### The Habitat Agenda

In the draft Agenda circulated in the fall of 1995, 23 paragraphs out of a total of 183 mentioned either women's shelter needs, or gender issues. In the final document, 69 out of a total of 241 paragraphs deal with gender, in a much more comprehensive way than the original version. In many sections there are substantial paragraphs explaining the issues involved and actions needed. The following section provides a brief overview of some of the issues addressed in the document.

In the Preamble, Paragraph 15 provides a context for the inclusion of gender issues throughout the rest of the Agenda. It is a critical piece ensuring that the document reflects women's needs.

Women have an important role to play in the attainment of sustainable human settlements. Nevertheless, as a result of a number of factors, including the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women and gender discrimination, women face particular constraints in obtaining adequate shelter and fully participating in decision-making related to sustainable human settlements. The empowerment of women and their full and equal participation in political, social, and economic life, the improvement of health, and the eradication of poverty are essential to achieving sustainable human settlements.

In the section on Goals and Principles, Paragraph 27 addresses the goal of gender equality in human settlements development and covers a variety of issues:

Equitable human settlements are those in which all people without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex ... have



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Artist: Grace Jung

ous UN conferences, where NGOs were often not permitted to even enter the rooms where negotiations were being carried out.

The Caucus had four Task Forces, each focusing on a particular section of the document. It was the responsibility of a Task Force to monitor the negotiations on their paragraphs, lobby delegates when possible, attempt to speak at Committee I or II if this seemed to be a useful strategy, and report back to the Caucus on the daily developments.

Some women felt left out because of the dominance of English both in the UN and in the Caucus proceedings. Although the Caucus was held in French and Spanish at different points, translators were in short supply. Translators were also unavail-

equal access to housing, infrastructure, health services, adequate food and water, education, and open right to inheritance, the ownership of land and other property, credit... the empowerment of women and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, whether rural or urban, are fundamental to sustainable human settlement development.

There is some recognition of the effects of structural adjustment policies on women and the need to review these programs with gender-sensitive social impact assessments (Paragraph 43) but the main emphasis in the document is on market solutions to housing needs. This is perhaps one of the most disappointing aspects to the Agenda. The Women's Caucus and other NGO coalitions had little impact in putting forward the case that market solutions often do not work for the majority of the world's poor.

There is a great deal of emphasis on the need for gender disaggregated data (Paras. 46, 51, 67, 72, 119, 121, 180, 208, 239). One section (Paras. 8 and 79) addresses legal and social barriers to women's access to land and credit and recommends legal, administrative, and community programs to rectify this situation.

There is acknowledgement of the feminization of poverty (Para. 115). Paragraph 116 promotes equitable access to basic services such as good security, education, employment, health care, safe water and sanitation, with priority to the needs and rights of women and children who bear the greatest burden of poverty.

Paragraph 119 provides a very in-depth analysis of planning issues as they relate to women, and lists several specific ways in which women should participate in planning and community development processes. There is also a section which deals with the need for gender awareness training for administrators, civic officials, and educators at all levels, as well as for community-based organizations (Paragraph 184). The need for a gen-

der perspective in policy and planning is also emphasized (Para. 186).

Other topics include: suggestions to "eliminate the sexual and economic exploitation of young women and children" (Paragraph 120); "action to dismantle international and national sex trafficking networks" (Paragraph 123); recognition of the need to integrate indigenous women into decision-making regarding human settlements (Paragraph 122); and the promotion of a gender perspective in crime prevention policies (Para. 123).

A considerable effort was made to uphold the language from previous UN Conferences, in particular Beijing and Cairo. Certain governments, primarily those from the Arab Block and the Holy See tried to reverse some of the gains made at these previous conferences. In the section which deals with population issues there was a lengthy debate as to whether or not family planning should be included (Paragraph 127). Even more contentious was the inclusion of "reproduction health care, which includes family planning and sexual health care" in Paragraph 136 which addresses health needs. Women's right to inheritance was also a battle-ground. In the end, the wording "right to inheritance" was used rather than the stronger Caucus version of "equal right to inheritance."

In the final analysis, it would appear that the Caucus succeeded in mainstreaming gender throughout the document and in retaining language adopted in previous Conferences. This could not have been achieved without the considerable organizational ability of WEDO and the Super-Coalition, the lobbying of the NGOs, and the support of women on the national negotiating teams. Women on the Canadian team were particularly strong as were some on the U.S. and the E.U. delegations. Women at all levels combined their efforts to formulate a document with a very thorough gender analysis.

#### GROOTS Toronto

The work of GROOTS Toronto il-

lustrates the potential for linking the local and global. GROOTS Canada originated in 1991, after women from Toronto and Vancouver attended an institute on community development held by the National Congress of Neighbourhood Women in Cleveland, Ohio. At this gathering, women from the U.S., Mexico, Africa, and Canada met to discuss common interests and concerns in the field of community development. Through this process, we came to a shared understanding of the usefulness of international dialogue and contact among women at the grassroots level.

GROOTS Toronto subsequently developed a local networking base, and currently serves as a focal point for communication in Canada, preparing national newsletters and connecting with other women's organizations. When our group met in the fall of 1995 to critique the Habitat Agenda we had very little experience in lobbying. We did, however, have considerable experience in women's housing issues and were able to develop very specific suggestions for 20 paragraphs of the draft Agenda.

The GROOTS Toronto suggestions were incorporated into the Caucus document, and in eleven instances into the final text of the Habitat Agenda. The following are examples of some of the paragraphs in which GROOTS Toronto text was adopted. Considering that there were numerous NGOs as well as national governments making amendments to the text, this is quite an achievement. Of course, in many cases what is included is not the complete text but rather a phrase which may not completely capture the intent of the original wording. In other cases, some of the concepts introduced by GROOTS were expanded upon and further developed by other delegations or used in other parts of the document.

Changes proposed by GROOTS Toronto are in italics. Italics also identify what has been incorporated in the final document.

Toronto GROOTS text:

*In different cultural, political,*

and social systems, various forms of the family exist. Families, in their diverse forms, are entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support. Women continue to have primary responsibility for the provision of child care, health care, and nurturance of family members. The constructive role of families, and the role of women within families, for all sustainable settlements should be recognized and enhanced by all States.

Final Document, Paragraph 31:

The family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened. It is entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support. *In different cultural, political, and social systems, various forms of the family exist.* Marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses, and husband and wife should be equal partners....

This was a particularly contentious paragraph as the right and fundamentalist groups pushed for a return to traditionally family values. The Holy See, Iran, and Algeria were among those lobbying in this way. The GROOTS language provides a compromise which broadens the definition of family allowing for inclusion of female-headed households, extended families, homosexual unions, and other family groupings.

GROOTS made various suggestions regarding the needs of homeless women and women who are refugees. These were combined in the following paragraph.

Final Document, Paragraph 119:

To improve the health and well-being of all people throughout their life-span, particularly people living in poverty. Governments at the appropriate levels, including local authorities, in partnership with other interested parties, should:

*Enhance community awareness of issues facing women living in poverty, homeless, migrants, refugees, other displaced women in need of international protection and internally displaced women, especially those issues related to physical and sexual abuse, and design appropriate community responses.*

In addition to the input into the two documents, we gained experience in the processes of a UN conference, and more importantly how lobbying can be done, and how local groups can participate in the international arena. In the lead up to Habitat II it became obvious that few Canadian grassroots groups, particularly women's groups, were involved in or even aware of the Habitat Conference. There was an opportunity to move into this vacuum and create some links between women on the Canadian delegation and women working at the community level.

Perhaps most meaningful were the connections made at the NGO Forum and at the Conference. Women from around the world were able to network and spend time with each other over the course of the two events. Connections which had been made in Beijing and at the PrepComm in New York were strengthened. Since women had been working together either in person or by fax, phone, or email, a sense of partnership and trust developed. Many people expressed the need for continued contact.

The success of GROOTS Toronto and the Women's Caucus should encourage NGOs and women's groups to become involved in UN processes. Although there is still debate as to the usefulness of the Habitat Agenda and many questions as to how to hold governments accountable to their commitments, the involvement of NGOs in UN conferences is one way to begin to change the UN structure itself and make it more directly accountable to civil society.

*GROOTS Toronto members include: Joyce Brown from Savard's (Women's Street*

*Survivor Project), Noemy Donan and Elizabeth Greaves from Dixon Hall, Gloria Gallant from Homes First Society, Bushra Junaid from the City of Toronto Housing Department, Sheila Miller from the Women's Services Network, Carol Mundle from Rooftops Canada, Maylanne Whittall from the Anglican Church of Canada, and Gail Yardey from Wellesley Hospital. For further information on GROOTS contact Joyce Brown at: 164 Munro Street, Toronto, ON, M4M 2B9, or by email at 104177.3101@compuserve.com*

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## MARGITA GAILITIS

If

If I hold  
you, my son  
in my breath  
breathing for two,

if I solve  
you, my son  
in my mind  
thinking for two,

if I love  
you, my son  
enough for two,

if my heart  
stops son  
burdened by two,

will you breathe  
solve love  
enough for you?

*Margita Gailitis' poems have been published in both Latvian and in English in Jauna Gaita, Poetry Canada, Canadian Woman Studies, and Alpha Beat Soup. She is currently working on her first novel.*