

Ensuring Indigenous Women's Voices are Heard:

by Mary Sillett

L'auteure fait un résumé des recommandations de la Déclaration de Beijing sur les femmes autochtones au

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Forum des ONG sur les autochtones présenté devant le groupe de travail autochtone officiel des Nations unies.

Women from 189 nations met in Beijing from August 30-September

8, 1995 for the NGO Forum on Women '95. They gathered to lobby the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held simultaneously, to define agendas for the twenty-first century that would chart a course for the future of women around the world.

The NGO Forum on Women builds on the three previous Women's Forums and UN Conferences that marked the Decade for Women: the first in Mexico (1975); the second in Copenhagen (1980); and the third in Nairobi (1985). This Forum, unlike the others, also builds on the major issue-based world conferences that took place since that time: the UN Conference on Environment and Development (1992); the World Conference on Human Rights (1993); the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the World Summit for Social Development (1995). Recognizing these issues and forging critical links between the conferences, women became central players on the international stage. Their activities at the conferences now affect the lives of women globally.

The NGO Forum at Huairou had a number of different processes occurring simultaneously and in the mid-

dle of the Forum, the United Nations Conference officially began, which further complicated the processes. At the Forum, I concentrated on the daily Indigenous Caucus sessions and when time permitted, I attended workshops. The UN Conference also had an Indigenous Working Group and in the final days of the NGO Forum, there was discussion between the two groups. This discussion was absolutely essential so that the Indigenous persons at the UN Conference could represent the positions developed by the NGO Indigenous Caucus.

Pauktuutit's positions for the NGO Forum

Before going to Beijing as a representative of Pauktuutit, a national organization representing the interests of Inuit women, I was asked to focus on the following issues:

1. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) has worked extensively within international forums to have Inuit and other Indigenous peoples' collective and individual rights recognized as essential components of international human rights work.

2. Of particular importance is the establishment of a permanent forum for Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system and the need to continue to change and strengthen the institutional framework of the UN to recognize the increasing paramountcy of the issues affecting Indigenous Peoples.

3. On November 4, 1991, the Council of European Communities adopted EEC Regulation No. 3254-91. The Regulation not only prohibits the use of leghold traps in the EEC, it bans the import of the fur products of 13 species from countries which either employ leghold traps or utilize trapping methods which do not meet international humane trapping standards.

The Regulation took effect on January 1, 1995. The Regulation provided a "year of grace" if the EEC determined that by July 1, 1994, sufficient progress was being made in developing humane methods of trapping. This "year of grace" expired on December 31, 1995. Twelve of the species listed in the Regulation are trapped in Canada.

Hunting and trapping is a way of life for tens of thousands of Aboriginal peoples across Canada. A ban on the import of wild fur into the EEC is not just a matter of economics or the maintenance of a standard of living. It is a question of human rights. Aboriginal peoples harvest 12 of the species on the EEC list and many of them have already suffered from the downturn in the hunting and trapping economy.

In Canada, an Aboriginal Task Force was created to look into the issue. Amongst their recommendations, they felt that at the international level, the following issues must be addressed: work towards gaining a "year of grace" from the Regulation; ensure that Aboriginal interests are adequately represented in the entire decision-making processes; develop a long-term strategy to deal with the EEC Regulation and related initiatives, including communications programs; ensure that there is permanent and accountable representation in Europe to communicate and provide current information on issues related to the fur trade; ensure a united front at the political level; develop alternative markets; and ensure EEC compliance with the Regulation.

4. Since the creation of the United Nations, there has been an ongoing debate about which term should be used to refer to Indigenous Peoples. We insist on the usage of Indigenous Peoples (with an "s") because under international law, "peoples," not peo-

The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women

ple, have the right to self-determination. Peoples have collective rights. People have individual rights. Some nations, including Canada, have refused to recognize this language.

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The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women

The Indigenous Women's Caucus held daily sessions at the Huairou site

where groups of Indigenous women from over 30 countries worked on a draft declaration to influence the UN Platform for Action—a strategic plan which guides the long-term activities of the UN. The collective effort of our group resulted in the Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women which covers the issues of concern to Indigenous peoples around the world: self-determination, land and territories, health, education, human rights violations, violence against women, intellectual property rights, biodiversity, the Human Genome Biodiversity Project, and political participation.

We agreed the two most important things were the issues of self-determination and the need to voice strong objection to the patenting of Indigenous genetic materials through the Human Genome Diversity Project.

On the first issue, we stated that the UN must recognize Indigenous Peoples with an "s" as peoples with the right to self-determination granted them under international law and as peoples with collective rights, not as people with individual rights.

On the second issue, the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), which is an international consortium of scientists, universities, govern-

ments, and other interests in North America and Europe organized to take blood, tissue samples (cheek scrapings or saliva), and hair roots from hundreds of so-called "endangered" Indigenous communities around the world, the Caucus called upon all to oppose the project. On the assumption that Indigenous peoples are facing extinction, scientists are gathering DNA samples from living peoples. Genetic manipulation raises serious ethical and moral concerns with regard to the sanctity of life. The Caucus opposed the patenting of all genetic materials and urged the international community to protect all forms of life from genetic manipulation and destruction.

The Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Peoples was given to Madeleine Dion-Stout, an Indigenous representative at the UN governmental conference so that she could use it in attempts to influence the drafting sessions of the Platform for Action. As well, the Indigenous Caucus drafted a message to the G-7 which concentrated on the themes that we are peoples with the right of self-determination, that we have rights and responsibilities to protect the earth, and that we need economic justice based on Indigenous values—not on western values.

Workshops

In addition to the Indigenous Caucus sessions, I was able to attend, among others, a workshop on the struggle for recognition of Aboriginal rights. The facilitators from the Frog Lake Indian Band in Alberta were unable to attend so two other women from Canada actually led the workshop. There were two issues which clearly dominated this session. One was the Indigenous Peoples with the "s" issue and the other was whether or not there should be separation of

women's issues from Indigenous Women's issues.

There was general agreement that the UN must recognize the self-determining and collective rights of Indigenous peoples. It was acknowledged that Canada was not a supporter of that position and that efforts have to be made domestically and internationally to change that position.

Two participants (out of about 40) felt that we must struggle to achieve fundamental human rights for women worldwide because women's issues are the same everywhere. Women worldwide want to be free from inequality, underdevelopment, war, and oppression, and we should not underestimate this effort by dividing women into different categories such as women, Indigenous women, displaced women, immigrant women, etc. Debra Harry, an Indigenous woman from the United States led the other side of the argument (which was widely supported by the rest of the participants) stating that there was a need in all forums to recognize the special circumstances of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples,

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unlike others, have been objects of legislation; have been colonized; have been treated like minorities, displaced, insular objects, and never like peoples with human rights, with self-determining rights, with any rights at all, and it is, for these reasons she believes, that Indigenous women need extraordinary recognition.

Another workshop was on sustainable development and biodiversity by Indigenous women from South America. This workshop was given by a speaker with a translator. She talked about the traditional Indigenous knowledge of her people and how this knowledge has been exploited by outsiders for profit. She was very detailed in her presentation about the knowledge and medicines of her peoples and she expressed anger at outsiders who, instead of respect, showed disrespect for the contributions they have made to the world.

This issue was frequently raised by many Indigenous women throughout our gatherings and its obvious importance is highlighted in the in-

tellectual property sections of the Indigenous Declaration.

Conclusion

The "peoples" issue was one identified by all the participants in the Indigenous Caucus and it is well represented in all of the documents resulting from the Forum. The fur issue is reflected in the subsistence issue of the Declaration. In the fall of this year, the European Parliament will be voting to see if they will accept the report done by experts from different countries regarding a process to determine "humane trapping standards." The outcome of this vote will determine international humane trapping standards and the regula-

tions with respect to the import of wild fur products.

Excerpted from a report prepared for Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association.

Mary Sillett was born in Hopedale, Labrador, and graduated in 1976 with a Bachelor of Social Work from Memorial University of Newfoundland. She has worked on Inuit and Aboriginal issues in community, regional, provincial, national, and international settings. She is a past President of the Inuit Women's Association of Canada and was a Commissioner on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Presently, she is the Interim President of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. She is the mother of two sons.

ALISON NEWALL

Plotting Courses (Or, What They Teach'Em Now in High School)

For Karyn, Kayli, Sarah, and David.

You learn
about peer pressure
and saying no to drugs and
sex and avoiding hormone laden
heat darkened rooms and
drunken driving and
all other irresponsible acts and then
they promise you'll
grow up
(and please
please be lucky and live to 20
and you and your mother can
survive) and they tell you
all about choices and
safe sex or safes,
and sex, and now
they have diagrams with
velcro parts, and you
put'em in the right places
and you pass, because now
you know
everything
but
I remember fifteen
and wonder:
would my life have turned out different with
decision models and flour

sacks like babies on my hip and
would I have married at
nineteen and leapfrogged to
independence and been a mom
by twenty-two and grown
slowly and painfully into
adulthood?
and can talk really tell
how you
get into those hormone
darkened rooms
in the first place?
and can words make you
feel what you'll face with that
rush of heat and affection and love and
tumble and beckoning thresholds
and no becomes yes almost by
accident maybe and who
knows now how you got there and
can you stop it if you want to if you try
or is it too late too
late and now you live with it.
And I wonder
twenty years
past fifteen
how we learn it and do
we ever

Alison Newall is currently a PhD student at McGill University writing her thesis on Lucy Maud Montgomery.