

Lesbian Visibility and Sexual Rights at Beijing

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AS ONE OF THE MORE prominent and controversial topics at the Fourth World Conference on Women, lesbian issues also garnered a great deal of publicity locally in China. Rumors had prepared the Beijing police and public for a lesbian bare-breasted public demonstration, and then the rumors evolved into worldwide news when a journalist earnestly filed the erroneous report over a wire service. Even though much of the attention to lesbians at Beijing was sensationalist or hostile, it was *visibility* that was precisely what the lesbian organizers were after: recognition that women who love women exist in every region of the world and that the difficulties they face are serious and integral to struggles for women's equality. By and large, the efforts to work lesbian visibility into the political project at the Beijing meetings succeeded.

The organizing for lesbian participation at the Beijing meetings was located internationally in a global women's movement. It emerged from the transnational lesbian organizing that began with the UN Decade for Women, when discussions at international meetings helped cultivate lesbian organizing in Latin America and Asia in particular, networks that in turn initiated the planning for Beijing. Anjana Suwarnananda, a founder of the sole lesbian group in Thailand and one of the initiators of the Asian Lesbian Network, first proposed a lesbian space to the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum. Representatives from every region of the world worked in a network to plan for Beijing, while the U.S.-based organization, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), served as the hub.

The lesbian issue had few full-time activists devoted to it. The majority of lesbian participants have primary commitments to other NGO work and women's groups. This cross-cause organizing has shaped the definition of lesbian issues as part of a broader international program for women's rights and development—a program to address the problems faced by women who do not wish to marry a man, who behave in ways considered unfeminine, or who love women. Even though this vision in-

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cludes many women who are not properly represented by the Western term *lesbian*, notably bisexuals or, in some cultures, unmarried heterosexual women, the word prevailed as the convenient, although admittedly problematic, shorthand in most Beijing events.

The "lesbian tent," as it came to be called, lay past the McDonald's stall and the Internet center as one of the seven "diversity tents." The tent served as the place to meet, to hold workshops, to provide information, and to prepare lobbying strategies for the UN conference. The tent was intended to be inclusive of supporters, the curious, and anyone who needed shelter from the rain. But the existence of this tent was especially critical to the many women who must remain quiet, or "closeted," about this part of their lives in their other NGO activities. The difficulty of being "out" about one's relation or identity was a frequent topic in ongoing conversations. The risk some women felt about being identified as lesbian to their communities presented a few logistical problems—for example, how to handle the steady stream of photographers coming to shoot the lesbians in the tent. Visibility can be costly: Filipina activists at Beijing reported that two women had recently been fired from their jobs at a humanitarian NGO in Manila when their relationship became known there.

Beyond its use as a gathering site, the tent served as a key symbol, a concrete manifestation of the lesbian presence and acceptance and was, therefore, a presence organizers wanted noted in the media and representations about the conference. The lesbian tent hosted a continuous flow of visitors, including fascinated onlookers and reporters eager to file a sensationalist story. Anjana, the Thai organizer, prepared a "lesbianism for the curious" meeting where attendees were able to ask questions about this thing called lesbianism. African lesbians and bisexuals met for the first time. For the most part, the neighboring tents, passersby, and the larger NGO community received the lesbian presence with warmth and welcome. These exchanges at the lesbian tent or the "curious" workshops were important ways to demonstrate that lesbians come from all regions, classes, and ages; to show that they can be happy, well adjusted, and have children; and to convey that the problems we face come from society or the state, not from our sexuality itself.

One of the main aims of lesbian visibility at the Fourth World Conference on Women was to speak out about the particular kinds of risks, difficulties, and violations lesbians face because of their sexuality. Workshops addressed lesbian organizing around the world, specifically in "the south or difficult places" (including eastern Europe) where being visible or obtaining facilities for meeting or even printing a newsletter is extremely difficult. At workshops on lesbians in Asia, some women talked about how families coerce lesbian as well as nonlesbian women into

heterosexual relations they do not want. Homophobia was in the current international news, too: the lesbians from Africa arrived at Beijing just after the president of Zimbabwe had publicly equated homosexuals with dogs, while in the United States homosexuality erupted as a hot topic in the presidential campaigns.

Outside of the explicit lesbian-themed workshops, lesbians were prominent in the larger NGO Forum as well. In a plenary session about rising conservatism, Rebeca Sevilla of Peru spoke on the specific dangers for lesbians and gays posed by fundamentalism. Daphne Scholinski, an artist from the United States, added her testimony to those of the twenty-one women from around the world at the tribunal about the violations of women's human rights. Scholinski told of her ordeal when, from the ages of fourteen to eighteen, she was incarcerated in U.S. mental institutions mainly for being a tomboy or gay.

Compiling examples of the problems faced by women who deviate from sexual and gender codes is an important part of the lesbian organizing effort. At Beijing, IGLHRC released a document that will help this organizing, called *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights*, which contains in-depth reports on the situation of lesbians in thirty-one countries.¹ Lesbians and supporters at Beijing made the case that the problems faced by women because of their sexuality are a political issue—that is, that “lesbian rights are human rights.” This phrase provided the slogan for the colorful lesbian march through the NGO Forum site, which was the second largest of such protests and was lined with spectators.

The official governmental meetings at Beijing offered perhaps the most dramatic moments of lesbian visibility, especially in contrast to the earlier UN conferences. At the preparatory meetings, activists for sexual rights (guided by friends in high places) had been rapidly learning and improvising tactics to ensure that violations of women's basic rights based on sexuality were addressed by this official forum. The drafts for the official document held five paragraphs with the terms *sexual orientation*, *sexual rights*, or *sexual autonomy* marked for debate by brackets. In Beijing, in a bordello-like room above a disco, the “lesbian caucus” met daily to plan lobbying to include these phrases. Inspired by the direct-action method of politics, lesbians staged a peaceful protest within the UN meeting itself, displaying a banner and placards. (Two Canadian women were “arrested,” prompting Bella Abzug to pose as their lawyer, but they were released without charge.)

Sexual orientation or lesbian issues emerged within a larger program

¹ For information on the anthology, contact IGLHRC, 1360 Mission Street, Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94103, U.S.A.; telephone 415-255-8680; fax 415-255-8662; E-mail IGLHRC@igc.apc.org.

that included the issues of single women, women forced into marriage, the variation of family forms—most broadly, as a woman's right to “sexual autonomy” or “sexual rights”: the right to choose her sexual and intimate relations free from violence, economic risk, or political sanctions. The most successful grounds on which to argue for lesbian rights were antidiscrimination terms, since government delegates could agree that discrimination against lesbians was wrong while not agreeing to rights concerning sexuality. In the end, the term *sexual orientation* was not included in the Platform for Action. However, paragraph 96 addresses women's right to make sexual decisions free of coercion, discrimination, and violence and presents a starting point for future organizing around the UN.

By and large, the organizing strategy emphasized more the ways that sexuality involved human rights than it did development or economic concerns. But while the lobbying efforts concentrated on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, it is important to stress that the organizers for sexual rights at the UN and NGO meetings did not separate these issues from questions of structural adjustment, economic inequality, or political domination. Lobbyists for sexual rights also collaborated with the health and human rights caucuses and supported the Caribbean's effort to include the phrases acknowledging a “diversity of family structures” against the Vatican's formulation identifying only one legitimate family form.

In the end, the clarity of the resistance to acknowledging sexual orientation in a women's forum served lesbians well. The explicit objections presented in meetings, conversations, and official documents made it clear that sexuality is a significant issue and also showed lesbian supporters the venom of the opposition. In the one-hour debate over the term *sexual orientation*, each country was compelled to take note of an otherwise invisible issue.

Obviously, there were opponents of “sexual rights” and the lesbian presence at the Beijing conference. However, the support for lesbian issues appeared to outweigh the proponents of what are referred to as “family” or “traditional” values. Back in the preparatory meetings in New York City in March 1995, lesbians and Tibetans allied over concerns about access to the conference, an alliance that lasted through the Beijing conference. More than two hundred diverse organizations signed an IGLHRC petition for recognition of sexual rights. Furthermore, more than thirty countries expressed support for the recognition of sexual orientation or sexual rights.

The high visibility of the lesbian tent in the NGO Forum and the respectful alliances formed in the UN debates demonstrate that sexual issues and lesbian concerns now have a place within the global women's

rights movement for "equality, development, peace." Speaking to the floor of the UN meeting in Beijing, Palesa Beverley Ditsie of South Africa explained the heart of the issue: "No woman can determine the direction of her own life without the ability to determine her sexuality."

Engendering Institutional Change

Aruna Rao Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

I PARTICIPATED in the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum at Nairobi in July 1985 and ten years later in the Beijing UN Women's Conference and NGO Forum. Both times, I went with a particular agenda and plan of work—as one of a group of coordinators and a panel chair of Women's Studies International at Nairobi and again in Beijing, as Asia coordinator of women's studies, as well as coordinator and speaker on a panel on gender and organizational change. Having a specific road map makes these large conferences manageable and fruitful, though their overall utility remains questionable. While there is some political mileage to be gained from focusing world attention to women's issues and gender debates through these conferences, they are cumbersome, necessarily allow for only limited numbers and kinds of participants, and yield substantively little for the effort and cost entailed.

The Beijing conference got off to an inauspicious start first in the choice of its location, which seemed to have more to do with geopolitical kowtowing than women's interests. In particular, the NGO Forum got short shrift in no uncertain terms by our hosts: the facilities were appalling, the distance from the official conference effectively dampened communication between NGO and official delegates, and the weather took care of the rest in that it highlighted the isolation of the Forum delegates and made the long treks to meeting sites far more arduous than anticipated.

While it is often the case that much of the work of world conferences happens before the event itself, this was particularly true for the Beijing conference, coming as it did at the end of a long string of world conferences. Much substantive work in setting agendas, defining terminology and concepts, and negotiating goals and strategies in the critical areas of human and reproductive rights and environmental issues had already been done. Moreover, in Beijing, the negotiation space for NGO delegates was highly restricted and structured. Non-governmental organizations that were not part of the lobbying process from the start found it difficult to join in. Lobbying the official conference effectively precluded partici-