With less than a week left and more than half the document bracketed, it is disconcerting to walk into the UN Working Group for the Beijing +5 and find that due to procedural hitches the chair had decided to leave and take a break. Not just once but twice — once in each working group.

Is this indicative of patience wearing thin or simply a bad initial working document?

On the bright side, everyone received an interesting surprise this morning, when the Philippines delegation put forward an extremely unique language formulation. In paragraph 134h “Capitalize on the new information technologies to improve the global sharing of information, research, strengths, herstories, lessons learned and best practices related to achieving gender equality...”, the Philippines requested the addition of the word ‘herstories’: “...sharing of information, research, strengths, herstories, lessons learned...”

Applause from the Peanut Gallery (NGO observers) sounded as we were so pleasantly taken aback. Of course, most delegations felt they could not support this word, due to the difficulties in translation, and some suggested that the word ‘experiences’ might adequately encompass ‘herstory’. But does it?

The Philippines delegation argued back, saying that for too many decades, women have been left out of ‘His Story’ (history) and it was precisely for this reason that they should consider emphasizing ‘herstory’. Maybe this is precisely the thing the international community should be recognizing, that women’s experiences, which are often left to oral tradition, are marginalized.

In the health contact group, sources say, progress on adolescent health issues have taken a nose-dive and concerned delegates have called in for reinforcements. One wonders whether in the last five years outlook of countries has regressed or whether those involved as delegates are inexperienced and unaware of the previous commitments of their own governments? Meanwhile conservative hardliners on young people’s issues especially pertaining to sexual and reproductive rights are having a field day.

Despite the merits of having parallel NGO activities, the NGO opening session held outside the UN proved to be a demerit in some respects as it drew the NGOs from the observer balconies to the streets of New York (around the UN of course!) leaving the crucial negotiations to the four winds. As a cautionary note it is important to not lose sight of our advocacy tasks in the UN building in the upcoming week that should be the priority.

By Zahra Ahmed and Erin McGinn

Tania Taitt from Suriname and Zahra Ahmed from Pakistan at the NGO welcoming session. (For full text of speech turn to Page 4)
Had an Abortion? Not Guilty
Impact in a Latin American country

No one has an abortion for fun. It would be great if no woman was ever pregnant without wanting to be so. Unfortunately, that’s not the case. Abortion and the discussion surrounding it has enormous social impact.

Until now the reaction of most Latin-American countries, Mexico in particular, to abortion is to throw the ‘guilty’ in jail. As a result, abortions have become a serious public health issue because it has to be realized in clandestine, highly unclean and unhealthy conditions. Every day, the health and lives of women and girls are put at risk, resulting in abortion to be the third cause of maternal death in Mexico.

Since abortion is outlawed, a ‘black market’ of abortion clinics has emerged. A woman with sufficient economic resources will have enough choices not to put her health at risk. Those women who are economically weak become prone to a physical damage that is beyond repair or even death. Problems connected to abortion are clearly a matter of social justice.

The national laws in Mexico consider abortion a crime. Exceptions come under some specific circumstances - like when the pregnancy is the result of sexual violence or when, according to a medical opinion, the life of the pregnant woman is in danger. In reality, these exceptions are made very difficult for a woman to make use of due to the lack of clear procedures, corruption and bureaucratic tangles.

If one wants to offer an integral answer to the problem surrounding illegal and unsafe abortions wherein the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls are violated, it is necessary, among other things, for the government to change the law. This framework should offer legal protection to all women that choose to have an abortion. It also should improve the procedures to make this legal protection effective, and should include the right of women to have counselling before or after an abortion.

To turn reproductive rights into reality, we should start by promoting, recognizing and defending the right of women to take decisions freely about their own reproduction. This should include the provision of accessible and affordable information, education and services in order for women and girls to obtain the highest level possible of health.

By Gabriela Cano Azcárraga

Approximately 80 countries worldwide will permit an abortion only when the woman’s life is in danger.

Over 700,000 women die every year as a result of an illegal (and unsafe) abortion; that is more than 190 women a day!

Many other women and girls suffer the rest of their lives from the effects of unhygienic abortions carried out by unskilled attendants.

There’s Life Outside the UN!

Saturday, June 3
Argentine Tango Party; 92nd St. Y, 1395 Lexington Ave at 92nd (212-996-1100) 8pm, $15. Sandra Cameron Dance Center’s Daniel and Maria (who coached Madonna for Evita) lead group lessons first, 10pm Raul Jarena and the New York Tango Trio provide live music. No partner required (jacket required for men).

Sunday, June 4
Left Foot Forward: Radical New York History & Architecture (718-264-3021). Learn an alternative history of the city, tour radical points of interest such as the site of the 1863 Draft Riots, the Weatherman house and the place where Walt Whitman wrote poetry and ate asparagus. Voluntary contribution requested. Meet 2:30 pm at the Peace Building, 339 Lafayette St at Bleecker St.

Comedy That Delivers: The Women Who Make Jerry Lewis Laugh. 7pm, Stand Up New York. For info call 212-595-0850. $5.
It was highlighted that the alternative reports made by diverse NGOs are very helpful to develop an inter-regional and intergenerational analysis and should be supported. These reports do not only inform on changed situations in the different regions and societies and in their governments but also remark on things that still have to be done, the battles that women are still fighting to make the world a fair place for all.

NGO Reception: Recharging Batteries with Whiskey & Wine

The Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CCNGO) organized a Reception for the NGO's yesterday. All the women and men were sharing a spirit of celebration and commitment for women's rights. One of the most important messages was to make sure that real advances were made against violence and pressure, equality, development for all, freedom of choice at all levels, self-identity for each individual and equal opportunities for everybody. It was highlighted that the alternative reports made by diverse NGOs are very helpful to develop an inter-regional and intergenerational analysis and should be supported. These reports do not only inform on changed situations in the different regions and societies and in their governments but also remark on things that still have to be done, the battles that women are still fighting to make the world a fair place for all.

Within the mass of NGO delegates present at the reception it was possible to find high level representatives from UNIFEM, Commission on the Status of Women, the International NGOs Committee, UNIFEM and the Special Advisor for the Secretary General on Gender Issues of the UN. They brought to the discussion the importance of women empowerment and the need to have more women in decision-making positions. In order to construct a world that really attends to all women's needs, women should have more say in all levels of policy-making. Celebrating what has been achieved since Beijing might encourage women and men to join together instead of confronting each other when solving of problems.

A final reflection was made about the great opportunity that NGOs have at this Beijing+5 conference to develop network activities, join in discussions and organize debates and panels. This should encourage and support them to continue their advocacy and monitoring at local, national and international levels from and within their own countries, and not to let this process stop after the UNGASS.

NGOs left the reception with more strength to continue their very much needed work for progress on women's issues.

―AskScot‖

Scot had a bad Friday evening. He got caught in the thundershowers and the air conditioning wasn’t working at the restaurant. He was pretty tired, but still had the time and energy to give another interview at the end of his shift. We thought we’d try to get an external opinion on the status of the Holy See at the UN, and the CFFC See Change Campaign.

What do you know about the Vatican or Holy See’s status at the United Nations?

I know they have a strong political presence...very influential.

Do you know why they have this special status, what is called “non-member observer”, basically just like Switzerland?

I do know they are the largest, most powerful religious organization on the planet. I didn’t know they could be a deciding factor [at the UN]. I know how powerful they are, because I was here when the Pope came. I saw the Pope coming by in his Popemobile. The streets were lined with people and security, FBI, special agents, more than you’d see with the president. I saw the tears and people breaking down because a man came by...It bothered me to see any human being have that much power. My question would be...what are you afraid of? The truth?

This falls in with our conversation yesterday, about tradition. Catholicism is a religion, but it’s also a tradition. If the information is available to people...do they not trust you to have the capacity to make a decision on what is right for you? And this isn’t just [a problem] with Catholicism, this falls under many religions.

[Either] people underestimate human intelligence or they want total control...either/or. Informing people causes some to lose a certain amount of control. This causes fear because if you’re [the Church] wrong about this, what else are you wrong about? As long as the truth is spoken and all information is given, what is the fear?

I want to get your reaction on an NGO initiative called the See Change campaign. It’s initiated by Catholics for a Free Choice, and they are asking governments to review this special status and they argue that the Catholic Church should have the same status as every other major world religion—as an NGO.

What’s your reaction on this?

If they [the Catholic Church] didn’t have so much power to begin with, they wouldn’t be the only religion recognized as a country. If you are deciding things, and if it’s filtering down on your terms, on your beliefs, I’m only hearing what you want me to hear. What kind of choice is that? I don’t agree with that type of censorship.

What about giving other religions more power in the UN? Would that be a solution? That would be chaos. Catholics, Muslims, Jews...you’d have a war. There’s just too many doctrines. We do need religion. It helps people relate to themselves and to God, but to put in politics, it’s too many conflicting beliefs. Religion as a whole causes too many wars. I don’t think God intended anyone to be hurt from any belief in Him.

Let’s stop trying to control and oppress each other. Let’s try something different.

(Scot’s ethnic background includes French, Native American, Italian and Irish. His mother was quite religious but his immediate family is not Catholic. He does have several extended family members who follow the Catholic religion.)
Speech by Zahra Ahmed (Pakistan) and Tania Taitt (Suriname)
of Youth For Women’s Rights at the NGO welcoming session on June 2, 2000.

I want to be known for the knowledge I possess, what I can do, what I can contribute, and not have any of these things mean less because I am a woman. I want people to see me as a person and not judge me by the colour of my skin, whether I’m hetero or gay, where I live, whether I’m rich or poor. I want to be able to recognize and value other people for who they are as well, and appreciate their differences, not fear or mock them.

I want to be able to voice my opinion. I want to be given the capacity to develop an opinion on topics that interest or effect me and I want to be able to search for solutions. I want the capacity to participate. I want to participate in the decision-making process.

And if or when I choose to have children, I will be able to pass that healthy self-esteem on to them.

I want to have access to accurate information and education about sexual and reproductive health issues. I want to be comfortable receiving this information, that means that I understand it, that it’s done in a private space, it’s done in a non-judgmental way. This might help if I hear this information from someone my own age.

When I need to use them, I want to have access to sexual and reproductive health services that respond to my needs as a young person. Where I feel respected and taken seriously. That are delivered in an accessible, confidential and non-judgmental way.

I want to be taught the concepts of honesty, commitment and I want to personally understand and fulfill these values. And I want to make sure that when a government says these things, it still means something. I want to make sure the international community can trust my government when it makes promises.

I want all these things. That’s why I am here. That’s why I want to make sure the international community can trust my government when it makes promises.

Five years ago, the international community produced a Programme of Action that brought us all one step closer to full equality between women and men. Youth for Women’s Rights wants to remember this and celebrate this. We want the delegates to remember this too. This five-year review is not only to reaffirm what has already happened, but find the next steps. We’re not just talking about words on a piece of paper, but a living, breathing document that is more than an international agreement, it is an international vision. We’re here to celebrate that vision, and fight for its realization.
The Youth Coalition for ICPD is an organization composed of committed youth working at the local, national, and international levels to promote the full implementation of the Programme of Action stemming from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo. The Youth Coalition emerged from the ICDP+5 Youth Forum, held in the Hague, in February 1999.

Through public education, advocacy, and coalition building, the Youth Coalition strives to ensure that the sexual and reproductive health rights, needs, and concerns of young people are addressed fully, and that young people from around the world are actively and meaningfully involved in all aspects of development, especially sexual and reproductive health, rights, and education issues. Its members, which range between the ages of 15 and 29, come from diverse backgrounds and represent every region in the world.

Min Min Lama: Min Min Lama was raped when she was 14. She got pregnant and was forced by her parents to have an abortion. Abortions are still against the law in Nepal, and Min Min was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Murderers normally get 10 years in Nepal. The rapist was questioned by the police but was released after two days. One of the youth participants of the Hague Forum on ICDP+5 last February had visited Min Min in prison and shared her story with the youth that were present. It was decided by the participants to start campaigning for her release. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Council on Youth and Population (DCYP) and the World Population Foundation (WPF) formed an action committee to inform the press and collect signatures on a petition for her release and for the de-penalisation of abortion in Nepal. By September 1999 they had collected over 13,000 signatures from the Dutch public, which were presented to the Ambassador of Nepal, Kedar Bhakda Shresdha. He promised to do everything in his power to focus the attention of the Nepalese government on this issue. That same month, good news came: Min Min was released! During a new appeal hearing, it was decided that she should be set free. For now, Min Min is living with a guardian since she cannot return to her own family. The Family Planning Association of Nepal is taking care of her and supporting her in all possible ways. However, the fight to de-penalize abortion in Nepal is not over yet. There are still about 100 women in jail for having sought an abortion. Besides Nepal, there are many other countries where women bear the risk of going to prison for having sought an abortion. In Chile and El Salvador for example, abortion is forbidden under every circumstance. Because of lack of information and services, many girls get pregnant when in fact they do not want to yet. They risk their lives, health and a prison sentence to have an abortion. Governments who deprive half of their country’s population from this care are violating the rights of women and girls. The Youth Coalition for ICPD, together with many other people, is advocating to include progressive language in paragraph 107 i, requesting that laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortions be reviewed as was included in the Beijing PFA (106k).

By Nadia van der Linde

Colofon
Zahra Ahmed (NAPY), Nadia van der Linde, Erin McGinn, Gabriela Cano, Sonu Chhina, Rose Koenders, and Scot

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