

# FROM MEXICO TO BEIJING: A New Paradigm

*Jacqueline Pitanguy*

**T**he United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing '95, provides an extraordinary opportunity to reinforce national, regional, and international networking among women. It is also of critical importance that, at the governmental level, the Conference document upholds the broader vision of human rights articulated in recent UN Conference documents, and continues to move these concepts forward. The primary importance of such international documents is their impact on law and politics at the national level. A strong document will give women the framework they need to advance their agendas, as well as bring to fruition the understanding of women's human rights that results from international networking.

Formal preparations for the Beijing Conference started only recently. Yet, the tensions and difficulties that have surrounded its organization, and the Conference document's language, are best understood within a larger historical frame of reference. This includes numerous international and regional activities, such as UN Conferences, Conventions, and Declarations.

The last 20 years have followed a path that was initiated in Mexico City, where the First International Conference on Women was held in 1975, and continued on through

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*Jacqueline Pitanguy is a Sociologist and a Political Scientist, Founder and Director of CEPIA, an NGO working on reproductive health, violence and human rights with a gender perspective in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Please send correspondence to Jacqueline Pitanguy, Ruado Russel, #680-ap 71, 22210-10, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.*

Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985. During these conferences, women worked together, and with government officials, developing international instruments that address gender inequalities. Most notable are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (1985).

In the 1990s, four UN meetings have been particularly relevant to women's organization and empowerment: the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro; the 1993 Human Rights Conference in Vienna; the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo; and the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen. Through the organizational efforts of women's networks at national, regional, and international levels, women's voices have become increasingly strong, leading to recognition of women as key political actors.

The importance of what has been achieved at the international level in the past 20 years is best appreciated if we remember that at this level, human rights concepts are framed in the UN's political arena. There, questions of national laws and sovereignty, social and legal inequalities, culture, religion, and traditions play a key role in determining the limits and possibilities of reaching consensus on a common, international language. In fact, these concepts are most often framed in the realm of power, and influenced by the instruments of politics: alliances, tensions, disputes, and opposition.

One of the major challenges of international politics of this century, and most relevant to any modern day rights discussion, was the drafting and adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a result of post-World War II order. Although the promotion and protection of rights expressed in this document were innovative and progressive, their articulation reflects a male-dominated world, incorporating generally male perceptions, strategies, and priorities. In the years since adoption of the Universal Declaration, and on the eve of the Beijing Conference, certain central concerns persist. Namely, the concept of human rights has still not been expanded sufficiently to encompass a concept of humanity that takes into account the social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances in which our identity is shaped and experienced.

Thus, during the past 10 years, women have begun to work together to broaden the global vision of rights—because one pattern that crosses centuries and civilizations is that women are less entitled to rights than are men. Throughout world history, and despite their resistance, women have been excluded from those arenas in which decisions concerning rights and their violation have been made.

In recent decades, women's resistance, in the form of strong and coordinated international political action, has had a crucial impact on human rights discourse. In bringing a gender perspective to the understanding of rights, women have struggled to ensure that all human rights—civil, political economic, social, and cultural—are equally guaranteed to women. This has resulted in increased recognition of the interdependence of all rights. It has also given impetus to the current debate on reproductive and sexual rights.

Women have brought a gender perspective to debates on poverty, violence, and social inequalities and, by necessity, redefined human rights language to include concepts of health, reproduction, and sexuality. Predictably, these perspectives have faced strong resistance and generated substantial controversy while forging some unlikely alliances. More inclusive human rights language has been considered threatening not only by conservative forces including the Catholic Church and fundamentalists from different religions, but even by some key proponents of the human rights framework. They rightly perceive that, ultimately, this discussion questions the roots, foundations, and values of the international human rights system itself.

The inclusion of reproductive and sexual rights as a significant sphere of the human rights struggle has been a central platform for feminists in national and international forums. Its resonance can be understood, whether using classical Western liberal ideas of individual freedom, socialist principles of social justice and equity, or current international concepts of bodily integrity.

The genesis of this new paradigm of reproductive and sexual health as human rights is to be found in the social history of health, in which discourse on health, sexuality, and reproduction is ultimately a discourse on social relations, power, and citizenship. Mediated by social class, race, and

gender, health and disease reflect the structural linkages between the body and society. The harmonious balance between individual physical and mental health is directly related to concrete existential conditions, as well as to the prevailing system of values and beliefs.

Recognition of reproductive and sexual rights as human rights has been framed by women in the context of national movements for social justice. These include demands for structural changes, primarily commitment and investment in social policies, to guarantee the quality of life and well-being of all people.

Although reproductive health advocates exist in virtually all countries and continents, the ability of Southern women to exercise their rights is impeded by domestic and international inequalities, especially the increasing inequalities between northern and southern countries. Southern women have been key actors in bringing these issues to their national governments and international forums.

Exclusion, whether based on class, gender, race, sexual orientation, or age, has long characterized the social structure of most Latin American countries. Therefore, in these societies, any analysis of social and political participation leads to a number of profound questions: Who in the society is a citizen? What are the criteria for one to be so considered? And, consequently, are the issues and themes accepted as part of that society's "legitimate" political debate truly representative of the concerns of the majority of its citizens?

I will now draw upon my background as a Southern feminist to discuss briefly how, in Brazil, women have fought to define health and reproduction as rights that are intrinsic to full recognition of a woman's citizenship rights.

Women have had a strong presence in the past few decades of Brazilian political history, denouncing exclusion and bringing new questions to the dominant political agenda. As a social movement, feminism emerged in Brazil in the seventies, a period of military dictatorship, state violence, and fear. But, as is often the case, this was also a period of resistance and solidarity among different sectors of civil society involved in the struggle for democracy.

In the first decade of the military regime (installed in 1964), the opposition acted as a homogeneous block with a

common agenda, centered on a return to the rule of law and on the exercise of civil and political rights. From 1974 on, social movements emerged raising questions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and environment, which acted together to put forth diverse agendas, in a mutual commitment to democratization of the country. The women's movement was one of the first to organize and gain visibility, bringing provocative questions to the political arena on such issues as discrimination, gender equity, violence, reproduction, and sexuality. Often, this meant challenging the limits of the ongoing debate on civil and political rights, and introducing the idea that the balance of power between women and men, at all levels of society, was key to democratization.

In Brazil, feminists placed the debate on sexuality and reproduction within the larger framework of the debate on democracy and women's citizenship rights. Pointing out the interfaces between biology and social relations, between public and private, they worked with governmental agencies, political parties, and civic entities to institute laws and public policies that would allow women to make informed decisions about their reproductive and sexual lives. Guarantee of the exercise of choice in this deeply private sphere calls for reconceptualization of the public sphere, in a manner that increases the state responsibility for ensuring the authority of women to control their own bodies.

Since the seventies, women's movements have criticized the State's lack of commitment and participation in reproductive health matters. This lack has exacted severe consequences on women's health. Private family planning institutions, guided by demographic concerns and a quantitative, interventionist perspective that regards women's bodies as a collective uterus which must be controlled, worked without control or regulations for nearly two decades in Brazil.

In 1983, with the participation of feminists, the Ministry of Health finally prepared a health program (Program of Integral Assistance to Women's Health, or PAISM), which framed the State's first involvement in reproductive health within a comprehensive, qualitative, and non-interventionist proposal respectful of women's integrity. This program included access to contraception; treatment of infertility; assistance for pregnancy and birth delivery; and treatment for

sexually transmitted diseases, breast cancer and cervical cancer. Abortion, which in Brazil is only legal if necessary to save the life of the woman or in the case of rape, was not included in the program, despite the fact that approximately 1.7 million abortions are performed in Brazil each year.

More than a decade later, PAISM has barely been implemented. For example, only 19 percent of public health agencies currently provide family planning services. This is partially a result of the general dismantling of the health sector, which occurred during the severe economic and political crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. Most importantly, the lack of implementation can be understood as resulting from a general lack of political will to take concrete action to meet the needs of the poor and marginalized.

Nonetheless, feminists, working inside and outside government, have continued to play an important role in the redemocratization of Brazil. Most notably, when a civilian president came to power in 1985, feminists demanded creation of a new federal body, the National Council for Women's Rights (CNDM) in order to ensure that women's reproductive and social rights be included in the new Constitution of 1988.

In preparation for the 1994 Cairo Conference, the women's movement worked closely with the Brazilian government in order to win international approval for the UN Programme of Action. The Programme represents a substantial advance in the placing of health, reproduction, and sexuality within a human rights framework. Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, managed to resist tremendous pressure from the Vatican in order to support the ideas of reproductive and sexual health and rights, including individual choice, various forms of the family, and a framing of abortion as a public health issue.

We came from Cairo invigorated by our work with women in other countries at the International Conference on Population and Development. We saw the Programme of Action as a powerful instrument to advance our reproductive rights in working for implementation of these recommendations at the national level. However, advancement toward equality and enforcement of human rights does not always progress linearly. Although the recognition of choice in sexual

and reproductive matters represents enormous progress, in countries marked by social injustice like Brazil, choice always has to be understood in the context of poverty and scarcity. For example, in the northeast, the poorest region of the country, almost 20 percent of women are sterilized before they reach the age of 25. While it may appear that these women have chosen to regulate their fertility, it is unlikely that their decisions were made with access to other family planning methods, or full information concerning the irreversibility of their choice.

Because women in most societies have been (and still are) largely deprived of the understanding and control of their own bodies necessary to fully effectuate their reproductive and sexual rights, any retreat in the language of Beijing's final document will be a major blow to full recognition of the human rights of all people. We are now approaching Beijing with the risk of not having the language already agreed upon at other UN conferences fully incorporated into the Programme of Action.

The Beijing Conference offers another possibility of networking to change the laws and, most of all, to diminish the gap between rhetoric and action. The shortening of this gap can only occur by means of political action and empowerment of women. This calls for national strategies and international articulations. Over 700 Brazilian women met in June in Rio de Janeiro. *Beijing is Here* was their slogan. Their action is part of a never-ending struggle against violations of human rights. Because, in spite of the relevance of international organizing, it is in the national arena that the crucial battles over human rights are fought.