Reflections of a Global Women's Activist
Susan Razali
August 6, 2006

Over the last few years, there have been a plethora of international human rights conferences, meetings, training programs, UN sessions, and Beijing +5 "Prep Coms" (preparatory meetings) designed to further the agenda of achieving gender equality and women’s rights in the 21st century. There is an international movement for effective social, political, and economic change at the local and global level. As Beijing +5 draws near, now is a good time for activists to be self-reflective and self-critical, at the international level as well as in our own backyards.

At the International Women’s Rights Project based at York University in Toronto, Canada, we are currently completing an evaluation of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in ten countries. The methodology we chose was a grassroots one. If global activists are going to organize and train women on the local level on the use of international instruments and mechanisms, the effectiveness of such work needs to be evaluated by the parties involved—the local women.

The study concluded that effective change in the status of women is dependent upon the capacity of local women’s NGOs to organize and mobilize members of their community, to use their countries’ inspiring resources, and to engage in dialogue with, if not to influence, their governments. These are political organizing strategies of local women’s movements as much as they are the use of CEDAW or any other international instrument. CEDAW will be effective if we can ensure that women at the local level have political power to force their governments to change domestic laws and policies in accordance with the convention.

At this point the greatest barrier to progress lies in the reluctance of governments to commit the fiscal resources for programs required to address even the most basic human rights—basic health, food, education, employment, and the cessation of violence. We hope that any losses by way of revenue generated from the application of the lost property doctrine will not be offset by a myopic focus on UN conferences and documents at the expense of building strong local women’s movements that mobilize grassroots women to bring about concrete and effective change for the most vulnerable. Beijing +5 and Prep Coms will be the battle for the rollback of gains made in Beijing, whereby states are trying to water down or repudiate the binding commitments or the allocation of funds towards the redistributive agenda. Governments around the world are subverting our agenda with their own political maneuvers in venues where we have little voice in the proceedings. We are increasingly aware of the ways in which enforceable documents or an effective means of implementation, and a process fraught with political intrigue out of our own making, what meaningful change an occur?

We in the international women’s movement need to question whether we have become too dependent on legal frameworks. We may be twirling around ourselves in ideological circles, distant from ourselves and from our real agenda. The narrow focus of criminal justice systems on “finding the bad guy” provides a much more comprehensive and thorough way to perpetuate abuses, too often victims are “victors.” Creating the economic, social, and political conditions that will lead to the securing of rights is as important as finding the violators and seeking redress.

Indeed, it seems that the resources directed to the International level have drained funding for some of our national women’s movements. This has been the experience in Canada, where the UN Women’s Rights fund (WRF) (as known as CEDAW) the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ( ICCPR) are increasingly finding Canada to be violating the fundamental rights of our most vulnerable citizens.

Canada appears of late to choose participation in UN conferences and international frameworks rather than respond to its own deep social movements seeking to change existing Canadian policies that abuse human rights. Such contradictory behavior is a paradoxical perception, especially among people in developing countries, of an imperialist international human rights and development industry. It provides an easy excuse for governments of poor countries with abysmal human rights realities to condone women’s rights, thereby feeding a backlash against the struggle for rights that women experience most acutely.

In Canada, human rights activists struggle to enhance democratic participation and accountability of their governments, but they must also be accountable to their own human rights standards. For example, we can no longer simply look at social security, health care, or other collective goods as measures of well-being, and ask the question to whom are we as global citizens accountable? One of the uses of the international instruments is that they could be used as a yardstick that could very low to articulate this hypocrisy of the North. But that is hardly enough.

We advocate and scholars seeking to broaden women’s rights need to focus on closing the gap between the local and the global, and while continuing to identify the priorities that matter, we need to ask things in the context of not only the lifetime task of protecting women’s rights that we have set ourselves.