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Edited by SONIA HARFORD

ACCENT

The united clout of churches and states might unite to ambush hard-won women's rights at the UN conference in Beijing, says **Victoria Brittain**.

Unleashing the tigress

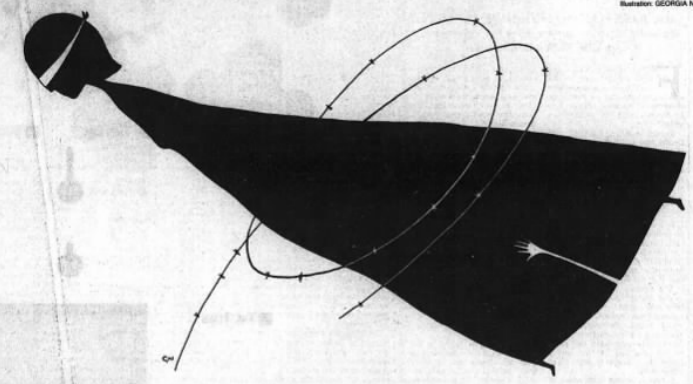

Illustration: GEORGIA NISBET

CHINA, the UN and the Pope have ensured that many of the 50,000 women arriving in Beijing this week for the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women and the parallel Non-government Organisations Forum, are extremely angry and not in the mood for being realistic. They fear that media coverage will be dominated by US-China relations.

But this conference embraces a vaster subject — "half the world" as the Chinese say. What is at stake in Beijing is the direction of women's rights, as conservative forces mobilise to reverse the gains made at recent UN conferences on human rights in Vienna, on population in Cairo, and the social summit in Copenhagen.

Almost one-third of the conference's plan of action is still in draft form with the Catholic Church and Iran, among others, attempting to dilute it. Activists say "they are challenging the absolutely basic idea that women are entitled to equal human rights".

The Chinese dissidents with whom much of the conference will identify are less well-known than Harry Wu, who was sentenced last week by a Chinese court to 15 years jail but was allowed to leave the country. Many are women like Ding Zilin, who lost her son in the Tiananmen massacre and is harassed for demanding an inquiry; or a prominent journalist Gao Yu, who has been jailed for revealing "state secrets". (Ding Zilin was arrested by Chinese authorities on 18 August on charges of "economic irregularities". Amnesty International believes the arrest was made to prevent the professor from speaking to women attending the conference).

Beijing police have been told to beware of Western feminists who may strip naked in Tiananmen Square. These fantasies hide the serious fears of the authorities. The United States may now moderate its criticism of Chinese human rights after the release of Harry Wu, but will the women be so restrained?

After seeing lobbyists from non-government organisations on hunger strike (over Third-World debt) at the UN social conference in Copenhagen earlier this year, the Chinese switched the site of the NGO Forum from central Beijing to the town of Huairou, an hour's drive away.

Accreditation, visas, and accommodation have been made an obstacle course which has defeated many delegates. A promised film festival has been quietly cancelled and video tapes brought for the conference will have to be shown to the Chinese before they are viewed by the delegates.

There should have been a major row between the UN and the Chinese. But the UN's acceptance of all these conditions was not surprising: the UN's own employment record on equality is appalling — women head only four of 27 UN organisations.

The Vatican has worked tirelessly to point the conference in a conservative direction, emphasising women's "unique nature" as mothers and circumscribing their role. The Vatican wasted months of preparation by reopening the questions of family planning, abortion and sexuality settled by consensus at the Cairo conference a year ago.

Its allies in these manoeuvres included Malta, Ivory Coast, Honduras and some conservative Islamic countries.

The advocates of female circumcision, defeated at Cairo, are back in full confidence. Women's rights to property, agreed to at Vienna in 1993, are under threat again in many countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, which have customary law instead of, or in parallel with, statutory law.

At the third UN Women's Conference 10 years ago in Nairobi, a blueprint was drawn up for women's equality in UN member states by the year 2000. Progress was to be monitored every five years. It is hard to imagine that women believed then in achieving such justice. The statistics say it all.

Today, women still do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. No amount of fashionable writing about "post-feminism" can make these intractable facts acceptable.

In the years since the first such UN conference in Mexico City in 1975, millions of women have routinely suffered human rights violations. They have been bought and sold as prostitutes in India and Nepal; have been raped as part of the war strategy in Bosnia and Rwanda; have had bottles pushed into their vaginas by policemen in Kenya for joining peaceful political protest, or been raped by the same police while being forcibly removed from their homes on ethnic grounds.

In much of the world, women have got poorer in the past two decades as those in public power in their countries accepted the economic policies drawn up by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

"Women cannot go on being excluded from macro-economic policy-making, which undermines much of our work on poverty," says Eugenia Piza-Lopez of Oxfam.

Equality, development and peace are the official themes of the Beijing conference. But without a revolution in the power structure of every country, of every international organisation and every media company in the world, each of these aims will remain beyond possibility for the majority of the world's women. All the previous conferences over the past 20 years did little more than raise the profile of women on the world's agenda. In the US and Europe, New Right politicians in particular have worked overtime to block the goal of equality, and to take away any gains already made. Even UN documents admit that there has been "some loss of momentum in implementation". But maybe things will be different this time.

For one, the critical mass of women; there are 10 times as many travelling to Beijing as went to Nairobi, and it will make it harder to ignore them. And the past two decades have seen women brought into the centre of the development debate.

IT IS now accepted wisdom that investment in women is the key to development, and that women's education is the key both to their own health, to their children's health, and to a curb on population growth, although action lags well behind this knowledge.

Another change has been in the dramatic shift in geo-politics since the end of the Cold War, which means that the old areas of rhetorical confrontation, which used to absorb delegates to these conferences to the near-exclusion of women's concerns, have gone.

There has also been a shift in the agenda, from the relatively safe area of "women's issues", to focus the debate on mainstream political, economic, social, environmental and military issues.

Campaigns such as those in favor of debt cancellation or against the World Bank's structural adjustment programs are important to women because women are the main victims of increasing poverty in both Africa and Latin America. Peace campaigns, such as those in favor of a complete ban on landmine production, or those against nuclear weapons, are central preoccupations of the women's movement.

The lobby for human rights has become both more fashionable and more astute about publicity over the past decade and particularly since the Vienna UN conference, and Amnesty will now put on the agenda of a conference like this the relationship between individual citizens and the state. So many authoritarian states, like Kenya, which was not attacked while hosting the 1985 conference, are likely now to be berated for their curbs on free expression and for their intolerance of political dissent.

Those who argue — as does the World Council of Churches — that the conference should be boycotted because China is just such an authoritarian state, can cite abundant evidence. Yet the Chinese may have opened the door to a tigress they cannot easily ride. What better place than Beijing in which to denounce man's inhumanity to man — and woman?

— Guardian

Fringe Net dwellers

By FARAH FAROUQUE, Canberra

WOMEN'S empowerment has run into a dangerous new frontier — the information superhighway, where they are at risk of being marginalised, according to some observers.

This prognosis was the background to a two-day forum in Canberra last week on women and information technology. Organised by the Office of the Status of Women, it brought together people working in the computer industry, academia and Government.

OSW head, Ms Kathy Townsend, says the idea was to get a dialogue going from women's perspective about the role of new technology.

"There seems to be a fair gulf between what I would call the 'techheads' who are going ahead making machines that work better and faster and quicker, and the social policy people who are saying 'what are we doing it for?' and 'what are the implications of that?'."

Ms Townsend said the clear conclusion from the conference was that women were not real players in information technology — sometimes even at the basement level. As evidence she cited a South Australian study in a low-socio economic area that showed a high number of women did not even use automatic teller machines.

"If you're too frightened to work out your four-digit Pin number to get your own money in or out, you're not likely to use these other systems," she says.

Ms Townsend warns that this fear of technology has serious labor market consequences for women.

"If info technology is the key to the future, if the future, if women aren't part of that system . . . they're essentially going to be ostracised from it later on."

Kathy Townsend

Ms Townsend says education is a key to empowering women to become more computer literate both at school and community level. The computer industry also has a role to play in education. Women would be more engaged when information technology became more relevant to their lives.

RAISING THE FLAG FOR WOMEN

THE United Nations flag went up over the Beijing International Convention Centre yesterday as thousands of women from all over the world arrived to participate in the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women and the parallel Non-government Organisations Forum, which start today.

A planeload of Australian women left Melbourne last night bound for China, via Sydney, carrying representatives of many women's organisations, and the bright and bussy Women's Circus, which will perform acts based on the Amnesty International theme, "Human Rights, Women's Rights".

Australia's team includes the International Women's Development Agency, which has sent women from the Pacific region to speak about their concerns, including unequal access to education, violence against women, environmental degradation and the impact of armed conflict, particularly in Bougainville.

Capow, the Coalition of Australian Participating Organisations of Women, represents 65 national women's groups, and has identified seven areas in which they will lobby conference delegates: women and the global economy, violence against women, universal human rights, reproductive rights, ratification of international treaties, women and decision making, and the role of the UN and NGOs.

From today, The *Age* will report the proceedings of the forum and conference. In early reports, criticism persists of the venue allotted to the NGO forum in Huairou, an hour's drive from Beijing.

Irene Santiago, executive director of the forum, admitted the number of participants, predicted to be 36,000, was closer to 25,000. Many foreign visitors blame China's lateness in issuing visas and general bureaucratic stonewalling.

Still, there are victories. Amnesty International has been allowed entry. This is its first official visit to a nation well-known for human rights abuses and a resistance to international scrutiny.

— Sonia Harford with foreign agencies

Young voices take message to the world

By SONIA HARFORD

LIKE many of her peers, Misha Schubert rolls her eyes wearily when she hears the hoary old myth that young women aren't interested in feminism.

At 22, the young graduate already has a solid history of activism behind her on and off campus. When she addresses a forum of women's non-government organisations in China on Friday, she will convey to an international audience the vitality of feminism in Australia.

Ms Schubert left for Beijing yesterday as a representative of the Victorian Women's Trust, which named her its Young Woman of the Future award winner. With a cheque for $6000 from the trust, she joins many other Australian organisations travelling to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, and the parallel NGO forum.

Heading the Australian delegation is Dr Lawrence, wearing her hat as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Women's Affairs. A raft of senior women advisers and bureaucrats will support Australia's presence, but Ms Schubert is likely to weigh in as the youngest participant.

Misha Schubert

Anxious to debunk the notion that young feminists are complacent, she quoted Gloria Steinem at a Women's Trust function on Monday. Steinem wrote that the increasing success of young women "is a miracle of foresight that should make us all proud".

In her speech at the Young Women Speak Out session in China, Ms Schubert will outline the Australian legislative reforms that have benefited women, but also caution that barriers exist in the translation of these policies into "an altered social climate".

"Young women still face many of the same stumbling blocks as their mothers in areas such as unequal pay, a lack of quality affordable, flexible child care, limited career success in the upper echelons of paid work and a lack of mentors," she said.

She also discerns barriers in the forms of youth unemployment, low self-esteem, and the prevalence of eating disorders due, in part, to narrow media stereotypes of women.

Ms Schubert became involved in feminist politics when she began an arts degree at the University of Adelaide. She soon suspended her studies to work in the area full-time, first at state level, before moving to Melbourne as national women's officer of the National Union of Students. She now works part-time as a marketing officer for an information technology company.

The American magazine *Ms* recently reported on plans to send teenagers and girls as young as 11 to the World Conference and NGO Forum.

In preparation for the events, an Asian-Pacific group of young women inserted a clause in the conference's draft Platform of Action to call for women's rights that "also inspire a new generation of women and men working together for a more humane society".

Misha Schubert will represent the Victorian Women Trust at the NGO forum and be an observer at the main conference, which begins on 4 September.

● Other recipients of the trust's 1995 grants, announced on Monday, included the Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, the Women' Electoral Lobby and the Deer Park Community Information Centre.

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