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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 204-210
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175049
Accessed: 23/06/2009 10:07

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human rights is a language that has legitimacy among many individuals and governments, the appeal to human rights agreements and international norms can fortify women's organizing.

However, realization of the potential we viewed in Beijing requires vigorous leadership and a willingness to engage in open and often difficult political dialogue across many differences that tend to divide women. It also demands that women become politically active in local communities, in national political contests, and in international debates in the effort to reshape the terms of debate for the twenty-first century. The Beijing Platform for Action can be a vital tool in this process as it provides an affirmation of women's rights as human rights and outlines many of the actions necessary to realize women's empowerment. But how far the Platform and the concept of women's human rights will take women depends on whether women are able to use them to further their efforts to influence policy and action at all levels from the global to the local.

On Cultures of Communication: Reflections from Beijing

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I WENT TO BEIJING for two reasons: to go to the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum to take part in the Women's Studies International Panel on Women's Studies in the Twenty-First Century and, as one of its accredited delegates, to observe the UN Fourth World Conference on Women. It is the experience of trying to be a delegate to the UN conference that is the source of some of my most critical observations.

In addition, my remarks here are based on two interrelated factors: the experience of being African and teaching about Africa from the West for fifteen years, and the experience of being in and teaching in Africa (Ghana) for the past fifteen months. The experience of being in Ghana has forced me to look at myself as a feminist teacher, and at the very practice of teaching, from yet another perspective. And before I go on to the subject of teaching, let me first discuss the conditions under which I have taught.

I have learned this year how very privileged I have been in my teaching career, on two counts, one general, the other specific. On the general level, my primary teaching experience being in the United States—where colleges open on time, stay open, and graduate their students in an orderly fashion, where I have access to free books simply because I am teaching

them in my courses, where libraries, academic, public, and private, are well stocked and accessible, and above all where telephones and fax machines function, all the time, and at affordable rates—has afforded me privileges of access; I cannot underestimate the significance of all this.

Furthermore, as a women's studies scholar, this past year has brought home to me how completely spoiled I have been at Rutgers in particular. It is not an idle boast to say it is one of the oldest, and has remained one of the finest, women's studies programs in the United States over the past two or three decades. Legendary names, Catharine Stimpson, Elaine Showalter, Alice Kessler-Harris, have been and are there. Also slow but sure is diversity, thanks particularly to the Laurie Chair, which has brought in not only Alison Jaggar and Carol Gilligan but also the African-American Paula Giddings, the Nigerian Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and the Brazilian Jacqueline Pitanguy. Charlotte Bunch has established the Center for Women's Global Leadership, to join the other four institutions that make up the Center for Women Programs on the campus of Douglass College, the largest women's college in the country.

It is not like this everywhere! Most of the time that I was on leave in Ghana, I was trying to teach at two different universities two hours apart, because of the overburdened, understaffed nature of their faculties. This, when we were not on strike. An eight-month removal of services on the part of the faculty, to get improved pay and working conditions and to structure a plan for benefits and pension, was met with hostility and the threat of violent action on the part of the Ministry of Education. It was a very tense year in Ghana. A few months prior to the Beijing conference the government, which despite the illusions of the West has not transformed itself into a democratic body, had encouraged its supporters to attack a group of peaceful marchers protesting economic hardships, killing five.

Those hardships affect the universities as much as the society at large. The unavailability of basic teaching materials, such as books and paper, is endemic throughout the educational system, and universities are no exception. My colleagues in Ghana are accustomed to planning courses based on the assumption that their students will not have, or even have access to, the materials they need. Campus bookstores do not have the foreign exchange or purchasing power to buy texts. The libraries are understocked, with no resources to subscribe to current journals or buy new books. The faculties have almost no working telephones, and the very scarce photocopying and fax machines seldom work. The list could continue. The miracle is that the universities produce students of the caliber they do, against all these odds.

Ghana has a reputation of being advanced in terms of the status of women (Ghanaian market women have attained legendary status in

women's studies circles), and this is not entirely unfounded. But there are constraints; one can be a strong market woman, but one certainly cannot be a feminist scholar; the hostility faced if one tries to put one's theory into practice as a philosophy of life can be soul destroying. Like feminist scholars everywhere, women in Ghana must negotiate our roles inside the academy and do our best to make that work have an impact in the larger society. This can be an uphill task in a society where *feminism* is still a very bad word, and what passes for acceptable gender relations, especially in the realm of sexual politics, can be horrifying. (By the time I left I had supposedly enlightened men, supposedly friends, telling me to my face that with the ideas I insisted on voicing they could certainly understand why I was not married!)

In Ghana there is not yet a viable community of feminist scholars and activists; it is a comparatiavely small community. And though there are powerful alliances among the few, through such organizations as the Development and Women's Studies Programme (DAWS) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (FIDA) and through loose, voluntary organizations of women, feminist scholars and activists are certainly not sufficiently networked. I appreciated more fully the kind of struggles under which the colleagues with whom I traveled from West Africa to Beijing were laboring, and what it had cost them to insist on going at all.

All this is to reiterate that, despite all our struggles, women's studies and women's movements have not institutionally transformed the societies in which we live into safe places for women. In some cases the heightened attention to women's issues could be said to have worsened conditions; a case in point is that it is the girl child who in today's world is increasingly becoming an endangered species.

The wider societal and political problems affect and sometimes rule women's lives in various ways inside and outside the academy. For me, looking toward the twenty-first century, the first considerations for radical change must be global economic ones. The experience of Beijing has emphasized to me the reality of the vastly inequitable and iniquitous distribution of wealth between the West and the rest of the world. This is the first barrier that must be overcome if women of Africa and the rest of the Third World are to take our places in the global world economy and in the global classroom and the front line that is the women's studies community. Without that we will continue to be institutionally and effectually marginal. We are courageous actors on our own stages, within our own communities, but what we do, and what we learn from our actions, will continue to have little impact on international and global policy and policymakers and on international curricula and, thus, on the shaping

of ideas and action globally, unless we become effective actors on the world stage.

This issue crystallized for me in Beijing on the question of communication. This came to mean to me three distinct but interrelated factors: the problem of access to communications hardware and, where necessary, the up-to-date software to support it; the issue of what I call a "culture of communication" and the impact this has on policy making; and the issue of the official language of the UN.

The question of the language of the UN was not exclusively an "African" question. Those of us who were at both the NGO Forum in Huairou and at the UN conference in Beijing could not help but notice the radical difference between language use and speaking at the two different sites. In Huairou there were all kinds of speaking situations, and all kinds of languages used, and even in the most structured plenaries there was room for informality and personal witness or testimony. The whole range of human communication was explored, from art and dance to demonstrations. In Beijing the setting was rigid and formal. The most informal sessions were the caucuses, because they were composed of the representatives of groups attending the Forum in Huairou. But even then, the larger the caucus, the more formal it got. The NGO briefings, though informal for Beijing, were more managed and structured than most activities in Huairou. And nothing but the Platform for Action was spoken of—the implications of its terms and the technicalities of strategies for getting it passed in a form that could be agreed on. Nothing else mattered.

Certain things had been decided before we got there. Any sentence or part of a sentence not enclosed in square brackets was already approved as part of the Platform and was not up for discussion. Thus the only thing that mattered on any given day was which clause was being discussed that day and which part of it was in brackets. Once that was established, what we needed to know was what was at stake in the terms under dispute, what alternative language had been suggested, and how to critique or defend the alternate versions. Our only function was to know which delegations were strongly in favor of or against the language we were invested in promoting, ignore them, and go and find the fence-sitters to get them to commit their vote. This was not an easy task, but nothing else mattered. Yesterday's clause did not matter. Tomorrow's clause did not matter. The only relevant issue was what was enclosed in brackets TODAY and who was going to vote which way.

This was not an easy task. It required a great deal of specific kinds of knowledge. For example, the issue of *child brides* involved a great deal of knowledge as well as understanding about how different cultures conceived of not only the term *bride* but also the term *child*. To some NGOs

and delegations this was a clear case of unethical, and gendered, exploitation, on which all sincere feminists and all governments of integrity should take a stand. To others it meant opinionated cultural terrorists were once again, without knowledge or respect, interfering in and making judgments about a precious social institution on which whole systems of exchange—familial, educational, social, economic—were delicately balanced.

The sometimes confusing debate between *equity* and *equality* required a knowledge of not only what these terms meant to the delegations in conflict and the conflicting uses to which they were being put but also the history of those particular words in other UN documents and protocols upon which this Platform was building. Then it required a knowledge of the voting patterns of each of the delegations to understand where they stood and, then, of the delegations whom it was important to lobby, a knowledge of who was in their delegations, where they could be found, and even whether and when they would have an opportunity to address the assembly. For not just anyone could speak. The people permitted to address the assembly were known and selected in advance and given a brief moment to make an intervention on their issue of choice. We were a world away from Huairou.

On my first day at the UN conference, I went to the caucus on the girl child, and it was my experience there that triggered this meditation. Including sections on the girl child as a part of the Platform arose out of issues inspired, motivated, and driven by women from the Third World, especially African women and those from the Subcontinent. But who was running the first caucus on this issue? Europeans and Americans. It was frightening. With all due respect, all of us need all the sisterly support we can get, but I had to sit down and ponder how something that is primarily our issue ended up under the control of women from the West.

I had to acknowledge that much had to do with logistics and communications. By the time we were arriving in Beijing, that Platform was being finalized in New York. The women who had worked on this at the ground level could not possibly be there. A handful of them had been able to afford to come to New York in March but could not stay. And even if those in New York had had the inclination or the time to follow up at every level, for example, on what was the position of the NGOs from Ghana, they could not have done so because the telephones were not working. I am using Ghana as an example, but circumstances there are not particularly extraordinary. In fact, they are better there than in other regions in West Africa, for Ghana is not, for instance, a war zone. However, despite this, the infrastructure in the capital city of Accra is weak. A major flood there on July 4 of last year killed dozens of people and brought the city to a standstill. It was a major economic disaster, taking

many lives, destroying homes, and ruining businesses. And it brought down all communications with the capital city for several weeks. So at a critical moment like that the women working on the Platform in New York could not have reached us anyway.

Yet even if suddenly we all had equal access to effective communication, how would we use it? I raise this because of my concerns about our "cultures" of communication. Many Third World peoples come from expressive cultures where the ability to communicate is highly prized, and certainly this is true of Ghana. But what I learned in Beijing is how little this culture of communication, on a social level, has transferred to a political culture. Thus, in Africa, fiscal poverty and lack of access to today's communications systems are exacerbated to the point where we become vulnerable to losing control over our own issues. Some of us in Beijing experienced a great deal of frustration trying to contact any member of an official African delegation. By the end of the first week, when I left, those of us African women who were interested in caucusing (and not only on the girl child) had been unable to find a delegation from one single African country prepared to give us formal briefings on a regular basis. This was in marked contrast, for example, to the U.S. delegation, who showed up every day at a specified time to talk to their people, to inform their NGO delegates of what was going on. From our desperate standpoint, their efforts of communication appeared exemplary.

There is a sense in which the communication gap between the NGOs and the UN was viscerally repeated in delegation after delegation, within the African countries, this time between the official delegations and the NGOs from their region. For many NGO delegates, just the logistics of getting to Beijing were a nightmare. In Ghana, there was an additional issue to deal with. The Thirty-First December Women's Movement, an umbrella organization for all women's NGOs in Ghana, decreed that all applications for Beijing had to go through them. This seems a fairly innocent request until one takes seriously the fact that, having been established by its president, who is also the First Lady, the organization operates more as if it were the women's wing of the ruling governmental party rather than an independent NGO. The injunction about Beijing applications had very serious consequences, as in the case of Hawa Yakubu, an independent parliamentarian who had been requested to attend the Beijing conference by an international association of democratic parliamentarians. Though the papers for the government representatives were processed, the Movement somehow neglected hers; as a result, she never got to Beijing. People not in the government's favor got to Beijing through "back doors." Some, as was my case, were sponsored in part by their universities, and others, by the foreign organizations in Ghana that legitimately employed them, such as CUSO.

Thus, the last point I wish to stress is the need to overcome political barriers that personalize all kinds of issues and prevent progress. It was painful that at a critical moment such as Beijing, some women who had done the work through the NGOs from West Africa had little impact on the final Platform, their wealth of knowledge and experience not tapped, because they were politically out of favor with their governments.

There are many different kinds of wealth, and our lack of fiscal health, which affects the materiality of our means of communication, should not also disease our modes of communication. In the absence of international electronic communication, we can, and must, still network and act, locally and globally, in more effective ways than we do now. We need, each of us, to challenge all barriers, to unite in strength and fight for our causes as women.

Educating Black Women Students for the Multicultural Future

Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Kimberly Wallace Sanders Women's Research and Resource Center, Spelman College

THE FOURTH WORLD Conference on Women held in Beijing was attended by a small delegation from Spelman College that included Glenda Price, provost; Kimberly Wallace Sanders, assistant director of the Women's Research and Resource Center; Evelynn Hammonds, Spelman alumna, assistant professor of the history of science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and co-convener of the historic Black Women in the Academy conference held at MIT in 1993; and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founding director of the Women's Research and Resource Center. The Spelman delegation was supported, in part, by the Ford Foundation under the auspices of a new three-year grant, which will enable us to enhance our present women's studies program and better prepare our Black women students for the global, multicultural world of the future in which people of color and women are in the majority.

In 1994, Guy-Sheftall completed a report for the Ford Foundation, which was released in time for the women's conference in Beijing.[1] It is a retrospective on the interdisciplinary field of women's studies since its inception in 1969 to the present, where now more than seven hundred programs exist throughout the United States. A major recommendation

[1] Beverly Guy-Sheftall with Susan Heath, *Women's Studies: A Retrospective: A Report to the Foundation* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1995).