Thousands heading to Beijing for Fourth World Conference on Women

Draft Platform for Action a focus of concern; NGO Forum promises to showcase women's accomplishments

NEW YORK - At first glance, in its physical form, the draft Platform for Action for the Fourth World Conference of Women appears innocuous. Like many official United Nations documents, it is graphically dull and typographically tame.

Negotiated in March by government delegates assembled for the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, the 149-page report is adorned only by two UN logos on the cover and uses a traditional mono-spaced typewriter font for the main text.

On a deeper level, however, the document can be understood as a major symbol for the aspirations and concerns of the world's women - and potentially one of the main vehicles for translating them into reality in the coming century.

In this context, the draft Platform for Action stands at the center of a maelstrom of hope, activity and controversy as some 40,000 women and men around the world prepare to travel to Beijing in late August and early September for the Conference and parallel NGO Forum.

At the heart of the document are 12 issue areas that government delegations, with strong and purposeful input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have over the last two years identified as "critical areas of concern" to women everywhere.

These areas of concern are listed as: the burden of poverty on women; unequal access to education; inequalities in health care; violence against women; the effects of armed conflict on women; inequalities in access to economic structures; inequalities in the sharing of power and decision-making; insufficient mechanisms to promote women's advancement; the promotion and protection of human rights for women; women and the media; women and the environment; and issues surrounding the girl-child.
In the current draft, each issue is followed by a series of action steps which governments and international institutions - and NGOs - should take.

"It is a very significant document," said Soon-Young Yoon, who is the UN liaison for the NGO Forum office. "It has nearly 600 different actions in it, and it covers a wide spectrum of actors, from governments to all sectors of civil society, from trade unions to religious organizations. And in general, I think, it is an attempt to be a document of affirmation."

Yet, as has been the case with draft documents heading into previous UN world conferences, there is much controversy and debate over just how far the recommendations and action steps should go in each area of concern - stimulating a flurry of pre-conference lobbying activity by NGOs, governments and other international actors.

Many "brackets" left

In the draft document, for example, an estimated 30 percent of the language remains in question. It is in "brackets," as those involved in the negotiations say, a reference to the fact that tentative language and disputed passages are set off with square brackets, [like this].

While many of these bracketed passages are relatively benign, reflecting the fact that much new language was introduced at the Commission meeting in March and many government delegations were unable to confer with their capitols in time to reach full agreement on them, there are a number of areas which remain hotly disputed. These include questions over women's reproductive rights, the human rights of women in general, and issues of resource allocation and the degree to which commitments to action can be made concrete and specific.

"What we are really talking about is changing the ratios of power and the balance of power between men and women, and between various countries, and between generations. And the question is whether you think that is a good thing."

-- Rachel Kyte, International Women's Health Coalition

"What we are really talking about is changing the ratios of power and the balance of power between men and women, and between various countries, and between generations," said Rachel Kyte, a senior policy analyst at the International Women's Health Coalition. "And the question is whether you think that is a good thing."

In the NGO community, there is a wide range of opinion on those issues. Among activist-oriented women's organizations, there is a general view that even if all of the most controversial sections in the draft document were resolved to their liking, the Platform for Action would still fall short of their goals.

"I think the document mostly re-states things that have already been said in other UN conferences and
agreements,” said Charlotte Bunch, the director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, which has been a leading force in coordinating NGO lobbying on human rights issues.

Others say that even if that is true, the document nevertheless presents a broad, action-centered program that NGOs will be able to use into the next century to prod their communities and governments in a direction that promotes the overall advancement of women.

"For many of us, the important thing about the Platform for Action is to have something that we can take back into our own countries and say to governments, 'You signed this, now let's get on with it,' " said Claire Fulcher, the United Nations representative for the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, which has more than 100 national affiliates.

NGO Forum aims high

Amid the controversy over the Platform of Action, a number of observers are saying that the activities and results of the NGO Forum may well in some ways overshadow the government activities at the main conference.

And, indeed, organizers of the Forum have high hopes that their event, which begins on 30 August and ends on 8 September, will become the heart and soul of the Beijing activities, giving the world at large a chance to "look at the world through women's eyes" - which is the theme that Forum organizers have taken.

Some 36,000 women from more than 180 countries have registered to attend the Forum, which will be held in the rural resort town of Huairou about 50 kilometers from the main Conference site. (The Forum was originally to be held at the Worker's Stadium in Beijing, much nearer to the main Conference site, but in late March the Chinese government changed the Forum's venue to Huairou.)

"At the Forum, you have thousands of people coming together who are primarily interested in sharing ideas, learning what other people have been doing, and then taking it back home. Not everything hangs on the Platform of Action."

--Claire Fulcher, International Federation of Business and Professional Women

"At the Forum, you have thousands of people coming together who are primarily interested in sharing ideas, learning what other people have been doing, and then taking it back home to their local areas after Beijing," said Ms. Fulcher. "Not everything hangs on the Platform of Action."

NGOs and individuals have asked to hold more than 5,000 separate activities during the Forum. They will range from seminars and workshops to plays and dance events.

"The topics addressed will span the spectrum of issues addressed by the Conference and more, from human
rights to economics to environment," said Chandra Budhu, program coordinator for the Forum. "There will be a great diversity of perspectives and discourse, and I think it will showcase the great variety of ways that women are working to bring human-centered values into society around the world."

As the Platform for Action has been developed around 12 issue areas, so will the Forum be organized around 12 "thematic clusters" - many of which overlap with the Platform and a few of which are quite different. They include: economy; governance and politics; human rights; peace and human security; education; health; environment; spirituality and religion; science and technology; media and information; arts and culture; and race and ethnicity.

"I think that some of the best ideas will emerge from the Forum," Ms. Budhu continued. "It will be much more exciting than the government meeting."

**Focus on the Girl Child**

One example of NGO influence was seen in changes to the draft Platform for Action so that it now includes a separate section on the girl child, said several NGO representatives.

"While I join in with much of the discontent over the Platform for Action as a whole, it is a positive sign that the issue of the girl child is now included," said Renate Bloem, who represents the World Federation of Methodist Women at the United Nations in Geneva.

Ms. Bloem and others said the section, which asks governments and institutions to focus on the education, nutrition and rights of girl children as a means of achieving long term advancement for womankind as a whole, was included towards the end of the Commission meeting in March, largely at the behest of NGOs, and particularly NGOs with strong representation in Africa, working with African governments.

"NGOs contributed substantially on this issue, particularly in the wording of the text which was adopted by governments and in the lobbying to make sure that the issue would be brought onto the floor and finally accepted," said Gianni Ballerio, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

**The Bahá'í International Community will co-sponsor a number of events at the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, including:**

A workshop about "Women's Perspectives on Global Security." Co-sponsored with the International Peace Research Association and the Association of African Women on Research and Development.

A video and discussion about a project entitled "Traditional Media as Change Agent." Undertaken with funding from UNIFEM in Bolivia, Cameroon, and Malaysia, the project uses theater and dance to encourage a dialog between women and men.

A workshop, co-sponsored with UNICEF, on gender roles in the family as they affect the attitudes and behaviors of boys and girls.