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## Reflections of a Global Women's Activist

Susan Bazilli

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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 equality and human rights for women. But how does such international work further effective social, political, and economic change at the local level? How would we know? 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, we have recently completed an evaluation of the use 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 at 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 communities, to use their countries' reporting procedures, 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 about the use of CEDAW or any other human rights instruments. CEDAW will only 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 fundamental human rights—the rights to shelter, food, education, employment, and the cessation of violence. We hope that any losses by the women's movement at the international level are not attributable to 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 change. The most absorbing activity of the last two Beijing +5 Prep Coms was the fight against the rollback of gains made in Beijing, whereby states have avoided commitments to the allocation of resources or to any redistributive agenda. Governments around the world are subverting our agenda with their own political maneuvers in venues where we have little voice in the process. None of this is new within the UN system. With little in the way of enforceable documents or an effective means of implementation, and a process fraught with political intrigue not of our own making, what meaningful change can occur?

We in the international women's movement need to question whether we have become too dependent on legal frameworks. We may be twisting ourselves around the legal paradigm in artificial ways, disconnecting ourselves from our real agenda. The narrow focus of criminal justice systems on "finding the bad guy," without a more comprehensive analysis of the conditions that perpetuate abuses, too often renders women as "victims." 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.

Instead, 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 case in my country, Canada, which the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) consistently awards the "Oscar" for the best country in the world in which to live. The ranking is impressive, as long as you don't read the "scores" for the supporting roles of women and indigenous peoples. Women and children are poorer now in Canada than they have been in the past 20 years. Given the enormity and horror of such human rights violations as genocide, rape, and starvation throughout the world, Canada's plight may seem trite. But the tragic irony is that Canada is one of the countries that could most easily remedy its own violations of human rights.

Canada's behavior illustrates the heart of the local/global dilemma. There is a growing gap between Canada's compliance with its international human rights obligations and its domestic policies and actions. Canada excels at international donor aid and provides expertise on democracy and human rights outside its borders, while seldom acknowledging its own complicity in abuse and oppression at home. In fact, UN committees charged with monitoring major treaties—such as CEDAW, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—are increasingly finding Canada to be violating the fundamental rights of our most vulnerable citizens.

Canada appears of late to choose to support participation in UN conferences and international work, rather than respond to its own civil society groups seeking to change existing Canadian policies that abuse human rights. Such contradictory behavior perpetuates the 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 atrocious human rights records to continue to deny basic 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 transparency in order to hold our government accountable. If we cannot do it at home, in the HDI "Oscar" country, how can those of us who work at the global level hope to ensure the accountability of the governments of victims of human rights abuses around the world? And perhaps more critical a question is: to whom are we as global activists accountable? One of the uses of the international human rights system could be at the very least to articulate the hypocrisy of the North. But that is hardly enough!

We advocates and scholars seeking to broaden women's rights need to focus on closing the gap between the local and the global, while continuing to identify the pressure points wherever we find them. This is no less tall an order than the lifetime task of protecting women's human rights that we have set ourselves.

## About Human Rights Dialogue

*Human Rights Dialogue* promotes a global discussion of human rights ideas and practices by presenting firsthand accounts of human rights issues as they arise within specific real-life contexts. In so doing, it helps to clarify the significant and ongoing evolution that is taking place within the human rights movement to make the human rights framework more relevant and effective in addressing the social, economic, and political challenges of the twenty-first century.

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Series Two (2000–2005) addresses the problem of the "human rights box"—the constraints that have enabled the human rights framework to gain currency among elites while limiting its advance among the most vulnerable. Specifically, the essays aim to locate the barriers to greater public legitimacy of human rights and to demonstrate how those barriers can be overcome.

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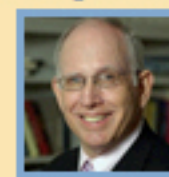
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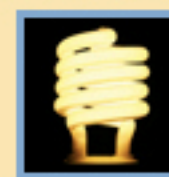
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