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Lesbians Travel the Roads of Feminism Globally

Rutgers University
Center for Women's Global Leadership

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When we met in 1980 in Copenhagen, Denmark at the Non-governmental (NGO) Forum held parallel to the Mid-decade United Nations World Conference on Women, there was a spark of recognition between us that we shared a common vision and drive to connect our feminism with our lesbianism. Both of us had come eager to see feminism develop globally and determined that lesbianism be discussed there. We also knew that this issue can be used to divide women, especially along North-South lines, and wanted to challenge the stereotype that lesbians are all white, middle class and Western. Our lesbian feminism had developed within the context of women's movements in our respective countries—the USA and Mexico—and we saw its growth linked to the emergence of feminism around the world. In Copenhagen we not only found that we shared common views but also connected with lesbians from other countries with whom we have worked ever since.

This article tells the story of lesbians within the context of the UN World Conferences for Women. Lesbians organized at all these events from the International Women's Year (IWY) World Conference in Mexico City in 1975 where a UN decade for women was launched through the end-of-the-decade events in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing ten years later. We alternate voices telling the story as each of us saw it. We use the framework of the UN World Conferences because this is an experience we share, and it is a common reference point for women in diverse countries. Further, the events (especially the non-governmental ones) surrounding these conferences became gathering places that reflected the growth in women's activities around the world during those years.

The United Nations certainly did not create either feminism or lesbian activism globally, and its official proponents have often been hostile to both. Nevertheless, it has provided a focus on women worldwide and expanded the public space in which feminist groups could work, as well as sponsored events where women developed international contacts and political savvy. Similarly, women's movements in almost every region have been fearful of lesbianism, yet feminism has provided both the ideological and organizational context for lesbians to become more visible and to challenge homophobia. Thus, both the UN World Conferences and the growth of women's movements around the globe have, often in spite of themselves, assisted in the development of lesbian feminism globally.

Clearly, lesbian activism internationally does not occur only in relation to women's movements and the UN world conferences. Much of it is cultural and some relates to gay organizations or is autonomous. While we make references to other types of lesbian organizing, it is beyond the scope of this article to cover the incredible richness and diversity of lesbian political life internationally. Rather, we

focus on lesbianism in relation to feminist movements as reflected in a particular context since we know that best and see it as playing a crucial role in advancing lesbian status globally.

Unexpected Turbulence

Mexico City, June-July, 1975:

> We can only regret the way in which some feministoid groups have turned the Tribune (the non-governmental event that ran parallel to the official UN conference) into a cheap cabaret or an indecent carnival. In the name of Women's Liberation, these groups came to exhibit their cynicism and shamelessness ... What are the lesbians doing here? What can they ask for? Do they want now to inscribe their pathologic irregularity in the Charter of Human Rights? Are they claiming the pathetic 'right' to boast about their sexual aberration? This unawareness of their illness just proves how severe these clinical cases are ... They have discredited this Conference and distorted the true purposes of women's emancipation.

So read the report of Pedro Gringoire in *Excelsior* (7/1/75), Mexico's largest circulating newspaper at the time.

Having lived all my life in Mexico City, I observed the International Women's Year (IWY) Conference, with all its 'outrageous incidents,' from the dark corners of the closet. I had fully acknowledged my lesbian feelings: 'confessed' them to myself, to my partner and a couple of friends. But that was all I could afford then, as an urban middle class music student who had managed to achieve a precarious economic independence. I was definitely not prepared to participate in what came to be the first public discussion on lesbianism in Mexico.

While I have no first-hand impressions of it, I have recovered that event from an article by Frances Doughty in the first edition of *Our Right To Love* ('Lesbians and International Women's Year: A Report on Three Conferences'), material provided by Judith Friedlander and by the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, and through an interview with Nancy Cárdenas, a prominent Mexican theater director who had not planned to attend the conference but went to the lesbian workshop at the urging of a friend.

Nancy reported, 'I was suddenly surrounded by 40, 60 or probably 100 journalists. They all asked very direct questions, one after the other. I couldn't even answer them: "Are you one of them?" "Where are the others?" "How did you decide to come here?" "What does this mean?"'

This 'meant,' among other things, that Nancy was the only familiar face for the troops of Mexican journalists who had clustered outside the room where the first lesbian workshop was about to take place. Her presence there as a well-known public figure in Mexico provided not only the possibility of titillating news but also a confrontation to the way the press had been handling the lesbian issue during the

conference. They had approached it as an imported extravagance, completely alien to Mexican women and to the legitimate interests of Third World women.

The emergence of lesbianism at the Tribune took everyone by surprise. From Mexico, it was not easy to predict that this gathering would become the frame for the first fruitful exchange between Mexican lesbians and organized lesbians from several countries. Consider the setting: the Mexican government appointed as president of the official conference Mr. Pedro Ojeda Paullada, the Attorney General, and the Tribune's meeting was opened by the President's wife, Maria Ester Zuno de Echeverria, who proclaimed that ' ... man and woman cannot be conceived separately ... The participation of women as citizens is a task that cannot accept deviations...'

It was through a Latin American feminist living in the US that contact was established between the lesbian visitors and the lesbian underground community in Mexico. After a few days of research, she obtained Nancy Cárdenas' phone number and invited her to the lesbian workshop at the Tribune. Nancy had been working for almost four years with a gay and lesbian group that was discussing Mexican law, reading and writing about principles of sexual liberation and consciousness raising and undertaking 'cultural guerrilla' actions: informing journalists and intellectuals about homosexuality and opening private debates with influential psychologists and psychiatrists.

In the context of the IWY's Conference coverage, the word *lesbian* was printed for the first time in a 'respectable' mainstream Mexican newspaper. The front page of *Excelsior* read: 'GIRLS FROM THE US DEFEND HOMOSEXUALISM.' The 'L' word, with all its reverberating effects, also appeared in an inside article featuring Laurie Bebbington, National Women's Officer of the Australian Student Union, who '...bravely stepped up on the platform to defend lesbianism and to demand that society not keep women with this tendency "invisible and forbidden."'

Another major Mexican newspaper, *Novedades*, under the headline, 'ARMÓ LA GORDA' (HELL BROKE LOOSE), reported that Frances Doughty, from the US National Gay Task Force Women's Caucus, demanded that the Tribune's program include the issue of lesbianism. The article also included long excerpts of Bebbington's speech on sex role stereotyping and the family: 'In this room there are single women, there are childless women and there are women who choose to love other women. Acceptance of a compulsory marriage and motherhood for all women not only denies us the possibility of choice. It downgrades and insults the lifestyles of many of our sisters present here ... I am proud to say that I am a lesbian: that I have chosen to love other women ... '

The wave of applause that preceded that statement, as well as the verbal abuse that followed, were also reported, e.g.: 'Throw her out!' 'Go see a doctor!'

The International Lesbian Caucus, formed by women from several countries at the beginning of the Tribune, had challenged the exclusion of lesbianism from the agenda in an article published by *Xilonen*, the Tribune's daily newspaper: 'Everywhere it is assumed that we do not exist or that we are a very small group of devi-

ants ... All women are assumed to be heterosexual ... Sex role stereotyping is the principal way that (these) oppressive relationships are maintained. This conference has reinforced this stereotyping by choosing to ignore lesbians in the planned schedule. The real issues of this conference have been raised by the participants themselves through free time at the microphone and through workshops.'

After several interventions by lesbians in the large plenary sessions, lesbian workshops were scheduled and organizers were overwhelmed at the positive response as people poured out of the small workshop rooms. Not only was it the first time that lesbianism had been openly discussed in Mexico, but the workshops provided the only space at the Tribune for discussion by women of their own sexuality. The panelists addressed different aspects of lesbian feminism, including the experience of two lesbian mothers. A group of Mexican lesbian feminists wrote a statement that they asked the panelists to read, speaking about their struggle against self-loathing. In addition, private meetings were held where lesbians celebrated what happened, talked more intimately about their lives and discussed further the possibilities of organizing a movement.

While the Tribune and the government conference did not talk further about lesbianism or take any actions to support the issue which most still viewed as outrageous, the 'L' word had been introduced into the UN Women's Year and the UN Decade for Women to follow. Nancy Cárdenas recalled being nearly 'pulled out of the closet' by circumstances 'which simply surpassed me.' So it was for many lesbians at the time of the Mexico conference. The moment to transform our individual self-rediscoveries into a collective enterprise and a public presence in the Mexican political scenario, as well as in the international lesbian feminist movement, would come some years later.

During the years that followed the Mexico City conference, I discovered feminism as a new understanding of politics. It began reshaping my life, validating my sexual experiences, empowering my social imagination and articulating my political desires. This is how I was able to participate in the coming out of the Mexican lesbian and gay movement in 1978. The movement also emerged that year in other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica.

Besides the growth of the feminist movement, other conditions favored the appearance of the lesbian and gay movement in Mexico during the late seventies: the opening of 'democratic spaces' through the Political Reform, a brief period of temporary economic affluence, and an atmosphere of rising social expectations. The years 1978, 1979 and 1980 were full of intense activity for the movement. We introduced the discussion of heterosexism and the importance of the lesbian issue to feminist groups, we participated in coalitions like the National Front for Women's Liberation and the National Front against Repression, and challenged the agenda of the University trade unions and the new sexological institutions. The first gay and lesbian pride march was organized in 1979 in Mexico City. At an international level, I made connections with the Spanish movement in 1977, when I participated in the first gay and lesbian demonstration of the post-Franco era in Barcelona. In

1979, I experienced meaningful exchanges as part of a small Mexican contingent at the US Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference, followed by the first National March in Washington, D.C. So, in a rather euphoric spirit, I arrived in Copenhagen in 1980 for the Mid-Decade Conference on Women, mobilized more by the promise of getting in touch with feminists from all over than by the UN's call for 'Equality, Development and Peace,' the official conference themes.

Claudia Hinojosa

Lesbians Network Internationally

One hot Tokyo night in July of 1971, I slipped away from the meetings that had taken me there to go to a lesbian bar with a straight US feminist and her gay male friend who knew the place. I had become a lesbian six months earlier within the context of the women's movement in Washington, D.C. I was part of The Furies, a lesbian collective eager to find lesbians everywhere with whom we could build 'a new world.' As I struggled through my gay male interpreter to explain our political ideas to a bar hostess dressed in a finely tailored pin striped suit, she kept asking if there really were women in my country who 'loved only women.' Her eagerness to know there were lesbians elsewhere was so great that she could not get past that question, forcing me to see the isolation that so many lesbians experience in the world.

During the 1970's, I worked in the lesbian/gay and women's movements in the U.S., but I yearned for a broader perspective and wanted to know more about lesbian reality elsewhere. In preparation for the 1975 International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City, Frances Doughty and I co-wrote an article on how North American feminists and lesbians might approach that event and make our issues visible without dominating it as *gringas*. We suggested that groups choose people to represent them rather than flooding the conference with USAmericans, so I found myself staying here doing support work while Frances went to be our lesbian presence. I followed the reports from Mexico feeling proud that the word *lesbian* had made it onto the floor and sad that it was dismissed by many as outrageous and Western.

Following the Mexico City Conference, the US Congress authorized a National Women's Conference to be held in Houston Texas in 1977 as part of International Women's Year and the UN Decade for Women. After intense lobbying of the Carter administration by lesbian and gay leaders, Jean O'Leary of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) staff was selected to be one of 47 members of the National Commission for the event. As a member of the Board of Directors of NGTF and one of the leaders of its women's caucus, I saw this as an opportunity to advance lesbian rights in the US. I worked closely with Jean and with lesbian, gay, and feminist groups around the country to ensure that lesbians were delegates and that our issues were included in the Houston Plan of Action.

Throughout 1977, conferences open to all women voters were held in every state. Many women got involved and feminist coalitions formed in response to

growing pressures from right-wing women's organizations who also sought to control the agenda. Lesbians all over the country participated in their state conferences —proposing resolutions, getting elected as delegates and building coalitions with other feminists. A significant number of out lesbians were elected as delegates and the national lesbian caucus we organized out of NGTF played a key role as part of the Feminist Pro-Plan Coalition in keeping "Sexual Preference" one of the 26 planks approved in the National Plan of Action. It was one of the most unifying moments in the US women's movement and a highpoint for lesbians marking both a maturity in our organizing and mainstream feminist acceptance of our presence and power. However, it also foreshadowed the intensity of backlash against feminism and lesbian/gay rights that has dominated much of US and international women's politics ever since.

By the time of the Copenhagen conference in 1980, I had begun to work more internationally and sought to find a path for lesbian visibility within the context of the UN Decade similar to what we had achieved in Houston in the US. I worked with two international women's organizations, the International Women's Tribune Centre and ISIS, to set up an explicitly feminist international networking section at the NGO Forum where controversial issues like lesbianism and abortion could safely be discussed. In addition, the Forum organizing committee had accepted five or six proposals for lesbian workshops in the regular schedule of events. These were well attended, primarily by lesbians from industrialized countries but with some Third World participants. In addition, women who did not identify as lesbians asked for other sessions to discuss the issue since they felt intimidated or hesitant to attend lesbian workshops. Several small groups met near the end of the Forum with women from a wide range of countries, including more from the Third World for lively dialogues where women seeking to end their ignorance asked basic questions about how lesbians live, have children, and age.

Thus, lesbians moved from outrageous scandal in Mexico to low-key networking in Copenhagen. The 1980 sessions were productive, but they were perhaps too quiet. Although the press sought to inflame anti-lesbian sentiment at the end with a photo of women at the Forum sunning shirtless, many who attended the conference never knew the subject had been discussed. It did not become a controversy and did not garner much media attention. With some 10,000 participants and over 2000 separate workshops and no room that held more than 600, the decentralized structure of the Forum contributed to this invisibility. The major controversies that grabbed headlines and divided women were over the Middle East and Zionism specifically, and the definition of feminism and women's issues generally. These divisions were serious, and Western domination of the conference precluded their resolution at that time. Still, there were important pockets of constructive exchange between women of the North and the South that the press ignored, but that led to global networks and projects during the 1980's and 90's. Some of those exchanges laid the groundwork for various global lesbian activities as well.

Several European lesbians present at Copenhagen were from groups affiliated with the International Gay Association (IGA), founded in England by gay men in 1978. IGA, a gay civil rights organization based in The Netherlands, was holding a conference every year. During the early 1980's, a number of lesbians working with IGA challenged its sexism and in 1981 formed a separate organization, ILIS—International Lesbian Information Secretariat (later changed to Service). From 1980 to 1985, IGA and ILIS both held conferences every year which, while mostly European, did include a growing number of North and South Americans, and a few participants from elsewhere. The IGA and ILIS conferences were the only ongoing international gay events in this period, although increasingly, lesbians also met across national lines at other events such as women's studies conferences. In 1986 the IGA changed its name to ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association), and its programs have come to reflect a larger concern with lesbians, although women are still a minority in its affairs.

The ILIS conferences in the 80's were lively arenas with raging debates over issues such as whether to work with men or straight women, the role of culture and politics in the movement, etc. Unfortunately, ILIS had organizational and financial difficulties and was dependent on the viability of its home offices, which have rotated over the years. Perhaps its greatest success in terms of global lesbianism was the last conference held in 1986 in Geneva, which had a significant number of Third World participants due to the work of the Geneva organizers. ILIS represented lesbian desires for global visibility and played an important role both in Nairobi and through the 1986 Geneva conference.

Between the Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) conferences, lesbian consciousness and organizing in the Third World expanded. At the first Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro (Conference) held in Bogota, Colombia in 1981, lesbianism was discussed in a small session as part of the workshop on sexuality and health. During the second Encuentro held in Lima, Peru in 1983, the subject was not on the agenda so lesbians called for a mini-workshop. The session began in a bar after dinner but drew so much interest that it reconvened in the plenary hall, where over half of the 600 participants present spent a very moving evening in what was perhaps the largest coming out event in the region. Following that opening at the Encuentro, a number of lesbian feminist groups formed throughout Latin America from Chile and Peru to Brazil, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. Visible parts of the women's movement in the region, they have continued to demand that lesbian oppression and homophobia be understood as issues for the whole movement and not just questions of a sexual minority.

Prior to the Nairobi conference in 1985, Asian lesbians also began to speak out, often first as communities in the West and then in their native countries. For example, Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (of the USA) brought forth a slide show on the history of lesbians in the region. A short-lived but vibrant South Asian newsletter, *Anamika*, published out of New York, reflected the spirit of making lesbianism everywhere visible. Its inaugural issue published in May 1985, in time for

the Nairobi conference, declared: 'We aim to provide information by and about Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Afghani, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Nepalese and Burmese lesbians ... lesbianism has been a part of our histories for thousands of years. We refuse to continue to be invalidated as a "Western Phenomenon."'
The 1980's was a period of increased lesbian visibility in the world but also of growing complexity within the movement. The AIDS crisis re-shaped the gay movement, raising difficult issues for lesbians about our role in responding to it. The growth of lesbian consciousness and organizing in many Third World countries was paralleled in the United States by a greater visibility of lesbians of color. As the movement became more diverse, the breadth of issues it addressed and people it reached widened, but these changes added to the complexity of determining what is a lesbian agenda. Further, the conservative climate in the West symbolized by Thatcher and Reagan required that lesbians spend more time defending ourselves, often at the expense of moving forward in new areas. In much of the Third World, the worsening economic situation heightened difficulties for lesbians who as women often lacked the economic independence necessary to live openly as lesbians. All of these developments set the stage for the 1985 Nairobi World Conference on Women, which began with rumors that out lesbians might be prevented from going but became an exciting arena for lesbian discussion globally.

Charlotte Bunch

Global Lesbianism Comes Out

In July 1985, more than 14,000 women gathered in Nairobi, Kenya for the non-governmental Forum held parallel to the UN End of the Decade World Conference. One of the most appealing aspects of this unprecedented event was the diversification of the lesbian presence, related to the emergence of feminism in many Third World countries. In contrast to the low-key networking that took place in Copenhagen, lesbianism was an issue in Nairobi that hardly escaped anyone's attention. On the first day of the conference, the Forum '85 newspaper confirmed 'reports appearing in two Kenyan daily papers of the presence of lesbians at the NGO Forum. At least 200 of them have already arrived in spite of the reports that their presence has offended other Forum participants.'

There were initially some edgy responses from the organizers due to rumors and fear of the Kenyan government's interference with and objection to lesbian activity. This uneasiness led to some misunderstandings that the press exploited. But the Forum Organizing Committee scheduled and respected official workshops on lesbians in relationship to Employment, Health, Racism, Education and International Lesbian Networking

As in Mexico in 1975, this was the first public discussion of lesbianism in Kenya. There was so much interest that informal sessions on the lawn at the University of Nairobi's Great Court were organized on a daily basis. This 'lesbian spot' remained crowded throughout the conference, mostly by Kenyan women (and

some men) who asked ALL sorts of questions, answered by lesbians from different countries. Though sometimes exhausting, this was one of the activities I enjoyed most because of the informal, direct and often playful exchange. There were also daily meetings of lesbians at five o'clock, which provided the best space to talk among ourselves and also served as a place to check out problems and rumors.

For many of us, the highlight of Nairobi was the Lesbian Press Conference, where women from all over the world spoke about their situation in front of the press. One of my most striking memories of that contagiously encouraging session was when a powerful Peruvian leader of the urban popular movement stood up to state publicly for the first time that she enormously enjoyed being a lesbian. Another outcome of the press conference was the Third World lesbians' statement:

> It has often been assumed that lesbianism is a product of decadent capitalist societies. We refute this argument and make our existence as Third World lesbians and lesbians of color everywhere known ... If it seems that lesbianism is confined to white Western women, it is often because Third World lesbians and lesbians of color come up against more obstacles to our visibility ... But this silence has to be seen as one more aspect of women's sexual repression and not as a conclusion that lesbianism doesn't concern us ... The struggle for lesbian rights is indispensable to any struggle for basic human rights. It's part of the struggle of all women for control over our own lives.

Being in Nairobi provided the opportunity to learn about different ways lesbians live and keep inventing daily forms of resistance or struggle within diverse cultural, economic and political realities. One inspiring experience was witnessing the success of the Dutch lesbians' strategy to get their official delegation to speak out on behalf of lesbian women. The Dutch delegate's speech included a call for defending lesbian rights and was the first historic mention of lesbianism at a United Nations conference. It also produced concrete results when the Dutch government followed up its policy statements made in Nairobi by providing travel funds for about twenty women from around the world to attend the ILIS lesbian international conference held in Geneva in March 1986.

In Geneva, approximately 800 lesbians attended the ILIS conference from no less than 30 countries, making it the most diverse lesbian conference to date. This eighth ILIS conference was hosted by the group Vanille-Fraise and housed at the University of Geneva. The organizers spent more than a year contacting lesbians from around the world, drawing substantial participation by lesbians of color from the West, a number of lesbians from Asia and Latin America, and one woman from Kenya.

There were 20 scheduled workshops, plus several spontaneous events and caucuses, along with films, slide shows and dramatic presentations during that intense weekend. New contacts, friendships and exchanges gave shape to the Asian Lesbian Network and the Latin American Lesbian Network. The resulting enthusiasm led us, the Latin American Network, to propose on the spot the First Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Encuentro to take place in 1987 in Mexico.

The Encuentro, an event that couldn't have even been imagined some years before, was held in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The first such conference in the region, it drew around 250 lesbians from Mexico, South and Central America, the Spanish and English-speaking Caribbean, as well as Chicanas, Latinas and non-Latinas from the US, Europe and Canada. Rebecca Sevilla, from Peru, wrote in the 1988 ILIS newsletter: 'Lesbian mothers, lesbian feminists, lesbian Marxist-Leninists, lesbians working in gay movements or trade unions, individual lesbians without a group ... were meeting each other, sharing experiences, fighting, making love ... and helping with the practical organization of the conference. The setting up of a Latin American lesbian network was a very important, but slow and difficult process.'

The Lesbian Latin American Network set a number of long term goals. These included breaking down isolation through the publication of a newsletter and directory, supporting international actions against the oppression of lesbians, strengthening our public presence through increasing participation in the feminist movement and other progressive movements, and organizing periodic Lesbian Encuentros in the region.

The second lesbian encuentro was to take place in Peru in 1989, but due to the difficult economic and political situation there, it was held in Costa Rica in 1990. During the 1990's, three more lesbian feminist regional meetings were held: Puerto Rico in 1993; Argentina in 1995; and Brazil in 1999. These encuentros required considerable efforts from the organizing committees who struggled with scarce resources and often hostile and repressive local environments. In the midst of such adverse conditions, the encuentros became the space for meaningful and sometimes polarized debates, as the movement grew, diversified, and faced new challenges, such as the severe impact of structural adjustment policies and increasing violence in the region. Some of the critical questions raised at the encuentros included the meaning of political autonomy and the need to make alliances with other social movements, dealing with ideological diversity within the movement, problems of organizational structure, leadership, representation, and the role of lesbian visibility within the women's movement. These continue to be challenges to lesbian organizing in Latin America as well as in other parts of the world.

Claudia Hinojosa

After the Decade—A Century

The UN Decade conferences proved useful to lesbian networking globally, but they were also sober reminders of how far we still have to go to get respect for the human rights of lesbians and gay men. While the issue was raised at all the NGO parallel events, no overall consideration of it took place that was endorsed or recorded by the group as a whole. Too often the 'L' word was still unspeakable—avoided or referred to only euphemistically in many women's groups, and lesbian issues were often marginalized as special interests rather than incorporated as part of the whole picture.

Yet, if we measure progress by how far we have come away from the isolation of lesbians prior to the UN Decade, there has been significant change. In the years between the Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) World Conferences lesbians became more visible in many ways, often utilizing the space opened by feminism. Lesbian groups emerged in industrialized countries in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand alongside women's movements during the 1970's and similarly in Latin America in the 80's. As Eastern Europe became more open, lesbian groups in Poland and East Germany surfaced quickly as did the Yugoslav organization which had hoped to sponsor an ILIS conference in 1990. With the end of the cold war, the 1990s have seen the growth of lesbian and gay groups in Eastern Europe, but the erosion of women's economic independence in the region has made it hard for many women to survive as open lesbians.

Asian lesbian networking that was encouraged at the ILIS conference in Geneva has continued to expand and several regional conferences for Asian lesbians have been held in the 90's in different countries from Thailand to Japan. Lesbians in this region face societies where they are labeled Western in spite of cultural roots that can be traced back as far as 500 BC when Buddhist nuns wrote lesbian love poetry. In India, two working class lesbian policewomen in Bhopal, India, who married in 1988, were discharged from their jobs amid an uproar that forced more open discussion of the issue in the women's movement as well as among the general public. Some lesbians in the region report that their union, registered as a Maitrikarar ('marriage of friendship'), inspired other lesbian unions in a country where young women facing forced marriages sometimes commit suicide together or run away. In the 1990s, a number of Indian lesbian and gay groups have formed, and the first anthology of lesbian writing from India was published in 1999.

Another important development can be seen in the global women's networks that have given recognition to the importance of lesbian issues. Soon after Nairobi, an Open Letter from the Third World caucus of the Fifth International Women and Health Conference in Costa Rica in 1987 included the statement: 'We reject a definition of sexuality as synonymous with heterosexuality. We demand that lesbianism be recognized as a political issue, and that sexuality be considered as socially determined.' Similar positions have been taken at all the International Women and Health Conferences since which incorporate lesbian issues as a matter of course.

In the early 1990's, women's networks began organizing to bring feminist perspectives into all types of UN activities that were not woman specific, including UN world conferences. I have been active in one of these —the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights— which developed around the concept that "women's rights are human rights" and first sought to put women onto the agenda of the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. While the NGO activities of this campaign have included lesbian rights as women's/human rights, we did not succeed in raising this issue at the governmental level in Vienna. A year later, an effort by the international women's health movement to gain respect for 'sexual rights' on the Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and

Development in Cairo failed as such but did generate considerable attention and advanced the document's commitment to women's rights and empowerment.

All of these developments set the stage for the first open governmental debate about lesbianism at a UN World Conference which took place at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September of 1995. Rumors about lesbians abounded in China where the general public had been told to expect bare-breasted lesbian demonstrations, and the police were rumored to be equipped with blankets to toss over any such offenders. While this preparation proved to be unnecessary, lesbians were highly visible in the NGO Forum held outside Beijing as well as well prepared for the debates in the official government meeting.

Activists for lesbian rights coming from every continent and a variety of organizations operated within a global women's movement that had developed considerable experience at UN conferences. Lesbians were present in the regional and international preparatory events for the Beijing conference to argue for inclusion of references to sexual orientation, and a network was formed in preparation for Beijing which was facilitated by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Many lesbian activists of an earlier generation like me were now deeply involved in the larger agenda of women's rights and counted on collaboration with a newer generation whose energies were more directly focused on lesbian rights.

One of the new generation of activists was Ara Wilson, who wrote about the lesbian caucus in Beijing:

> At the preparatory meetings, activists for sexual rights (guided by friends in high places) had been rapidly learning and improvising tactics to ensure that violations of women's basic rights based on sexuality were addressed by this official forum. The drafts for the official document held five paragraphs with the terms *sexual orientation, sexual rights or sexual* autonomy marked for debate by brackets. In Beijing, in a bordello-like room above a disco, the lesbian caucus met daily to plan lobbying to include these phrases. Inspired by the direct-action method of politics, lesbians staged a peaceful protest within the UN meeting itself, displaying a banner and placards.

The lesbian caucus was also allotted an NGO slot to speak in the plenary. Palesa Beverley Ditsie a young lesbian from South Africa used it well to remind the assembly that 'No woman can determine the direction of her own life without the ability to determine her sexuality.'

While the space for debate over the inclusion of the term sexual orientation in the inter-governmental conference was a victorious first, this discussion was put off until the early hours of the morning on the last night and it was often venomous. None of the references survived, but there was support from some 30 countries including an extremely moving statement by a South African delegate that they had just emerged from a struggle against discrimination and would never sanction it against another group. Such support was critical given the effort by some to label this a white Western issue—an accusation that often turned ugly as when an older African leader attacked Ditsie after her speech saying she must have some 'white