

Beijing

+5

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After five days of marathon meetings, thousands of women - and a handful of men - managed to produce a new blueprint aimed at improving women's lives. But it was a close call. The majority of the 10,000 participants gathered had all but given up hope that an agreement would be reached. The occasion was a special session of the United Nations General Assembly, held June 5 to 9 in New York, and dedicated to assessing women's progress in the five years since the last major conference was held in Beijing, China.

The agreement concerned a document called Future Actions and Initiatives, which was likened to a "bill of rights" for women. It was finally in the late hours of Friday, the last day of meetings, when the details were hammered out, and an accord reached. Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century, known also as Beijing+5 - referring to the pivotal UN forum on women held in 1995 in the Chinese capital - gathered representatives from government, non-governmental organizations and UN agencies to examine women's progress and determine how to move forward in the quest for equality.

It was Yakin Erturk, the director of the Office for the Advancement of Women at UN Headquarters in New York, who dubbed the document "a bill of rights for women." Based on the results of a comprehensive questionnaire sent to governments asking them what they had done to promote equality since Beijing, Future Actions and Initiatives was compiled, that "reinforces and strengthens the Platform for Action," she said, referring to the impressive outcome of the Beijing conference. Noeleen Heyzer, the executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women, summed up the week-long conference: "the meetings are about commitment, accountability and transformation," she had told the media on the eve of the meetings. "The stakes are high because progress for women ultimately means progress for all," she stressed.

Throughout the week, already tight security measures at headquarters were beefed up because of the participation of many high-profile women, which included Queen Noor and

Princess Basma of Jordan, a number of First Ladies - Hillary Rodham Clinton, Andrée Lahoud, Suzanne Mubarak, and numerous ministers. Along with committee meetings on the various sections of the Future Initiatives document and member states addressing the Assembly on the status of implementing the Platform in their respective countries, the conference included panel discussions, film screenings, and endless, less formal discussions over coffee.

When Lebanon's own First Lady took to the podium, she spoke concisely, concentrating her address on recent events. As president of the Lebanese Commission on the Status of women heading Lebanon's delegation to New York, Lahoud had called on the international community to provide "further and immediate assistance" to the south. The aid, she stressed, would serve to alleviate some of the suffering of the region, and prevent "these pains from overflowing into new catastrophes and strife."

Appealing to the conscience of the world, Lahoud said the needs of the south were enormous. "There is no electricity, no roads, no water, not even any agriculture," she said, urging the international community to provide the necessary assistance. "The region of South Lebanon remains a witness to the ravages of occupation, and epitomizes backwardness and desolation." Meanwhile, by noon Friday, with 15 percent of the document still being debated, Erturk insisted that meetings would continue until the remaining issues of contention were resolved. "I don't even want to think of the alternative," she said then, noting that delegates had shown their commitment to finalizing the document, which calls on governments to take future initiatives and actions in implementing the Beijing Platform.

The dissension was over the wording on subjects considered "sensitive," including sexual orientation, reproductive and sexual health, and the family. Faced with growing speculation that the gains of Beijing would be lost in New York, Erturk swiftly dismissed fears that the Beijing Plus Five meetings would result in a "Beijing Minus Five" document. "All delegates have agreed that there is no going back to before Beijing," she said. "Some areas are stronger, than others, and the language of Beijing is being used because those issues are still delicate." One such case is abortion. During the meetings, liberal groups accused the Vatican and Islamic



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countries of trying to erode gains made in Beijing. In the end, the wording of Beijing was maintained - calling for safe abortions in countries where it is legal.

Erturk admitted that, for such issues, new wording was problematic; but she stressed that, in other areas, the document had surpassed Beijing. "For example, in the area of violence against women, there is already more awareness and much more being done," she said, highlighting in particular the gradual elimination of honor killings, or which she dubbed "dishonor killings." Among a number of conservative nations, there was substantial concern that the language and norms of western nations were being imposed on countries still struggling to deal with the more basic issues of equality, such as economic independence, inheritance rights, and access to the decision-making process.

For all the controversy and exchanges surrounding a few points, however, delegates didn't want to lose sight of the significance of what had been achieved. "We have moved forward on so many points, even on new issues which were

raised, we shouldn't forget that," said Sofia Fuentes, a member of one of several Spanish NGOs attending the conference.

Among those issues to which Fuentes referred was the trafficking of women and children. The

subject was raised by a number of delegates, including Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State. Albright called for international efforts to stop this "rapidly growing criminal enterprise" which she stressed had "gone global." At the end of the week, and despite the many altercations and the need to revert to previous wording on a handful of issues, progress had been made. Women and men walked away with a new commitment to the struggle for equality. And, to many of the delegates, that certainly was not the only achievement. "This coming together of all these women and men from all over the world- that's also an accomplishment," observed Fuentes.

* May Farah attended the conference at the invitation of the United Nations Development Fund for Women in her capacity as a reporter for *The Daily Star*