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Special Issue

LI Executive Meeting, and INLW Women's Day 18-21 February 2000, Taipei

UN Commission on the Status of Women 28 February to 17 March 2000, New York

The KMT has been in power continuously since General Chiang Kai-Shek arrived in Taiwan in 1949 and the successful election of Chen Shui-Bian and Annette Lu on March 18th is a landmark for Liberalism worldwide. The Party's main challenge now is in foreign affairs, particularly in its relations with mainland China and the USA. DPP opinion polls showed that older women, in particular, failed to support the Party from fear that a DPP win would provoke attacks from China. So far, these fears have not been realised.

Taiwan has a highly successful economy, with a healthy trade balance, but women have not benefited equally from this success. Elizabeth Sidney worked with Bi-Khim Hsiao, DPP Director of International Affairs, to plan a women's day following the conclusion of the L.I. Executive meeting.

Women's Meeting Taipei

This was held on February 21st. It was limited to a half-day in view of participants' commitments in the Presidential campaign. The meeting opened with an address by Elizabeth, who especially welcomed the DPP's 24% quota for women Parliamentary candidates. "Selectors must have a chance at least to see women candidates. Our experience is that once they are selected women get a fair vote from the electorate" she said. She then spoke in support of Annette Lu and gave a brief outline of INL W history and activities. We were exceptionally fortunate that Annette Lu was able to join us.

In her address, she stressed that democracy is inextricably linked to women's rights. The DPP will aim to extend opportunities and social welfare for those on lower incomes (predominantly women) and to promote alleviation of women's domestic load. The meeting then contributions from leaders in several highly active women's ngos. Annette Lu stayed for much of the discussion. Among the contributors,

Huey- Yu Lin, Director of TAPWER (Taipei Association for the Promotion of Women's Rights) spoke of the organisation's work to raise awareness of women's issues. This powerful organisation provides training in women's rights and in decision-making, manual and domestic skills, languages and cultural activities. TAPWER has campaigned vigorously and with some success to promote women's health and access to health services, to reform of marital, property, child custody and employment laws and especially to counteract violence against women and improve public safety.

Other organisations work to end child prostitution, child pornography and transnational sexual exploitation; to campaign against sexual violence, and promote women's security and equal rights in politics and education; to improve women's political understanding and to provide women workers with legal advice, help with employers, petitions and information.

A total of 34 people attended the meeting and the organisers expressed satisfaction that so many had arrived, some from distant areas. They were also pleased at the opportunity provided for women from so many organisations to exchange views. The meeting ran 40 minutes over time.

Elizabeth distributed leaflets on the work of INL W, copies of our survey of issues to be discussed at the March meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and copies of our booklet on domestic violence. Interest in joining INL W was heightened because Taiwan is not recognised by the UN and so they need alternative routes to express their views.

Our splendid new banner received its first outing at this meeting. It was then hurried to Cambridge for Marie- Therese Bianchi to take to display in Nicaragua.

UN Commission on the Status of Women Meeting 28 February to 17th March, New York

The first week of this meeting was devoted to CSW business and weeks two and three to debating the draft report on progress since Beijing. This was being prepared for consideration by the Special United Nations meeting in June. From INLW, Jeannine de Boccard attended weeks one and two and Elizabeth Sidney attended week two.

The draft report was based on reports received from national governments and NGOs and debates on every paragraph and sentence were, as ever, intense. Each section was assigned to a special caucus and caucus meetings were interspersed with lobbying to persuade the unconvinced or opposed to adopt particular phrases.

The formula for editing these drafts is for sentences or phrases not agreed or resolved in debate to be set in square brackets, in the hope of future agreement. New proposals may also be added in brackets, together with the initials of the proposer. By the end of the second week, a document was emerging, but one which would clearly need much further work and negotiation by CSW staff long after the CSW meeting was closed. In fact, the document now going to the Beijing plus Five meeting still contains many unresolved issues.

Since it is impossible to cover every section under discussion, Elizabeth stayed with the caucus on Women and Human Rights. This was one of the three major areas identified in our poll of INLW members as areas on which INLW delegates should concentrate (the others were poverty and institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women). The human rights caucus affirmed the importance of the Beijing Platform for Action as a major statement of human rights. It called for specific goals and targets to be attained in all the PFA twelve areas of concern, and for targets to be matched by adequate resources, and underpinned by legislation. Progress should be monitored using disaggregated data, drawing on the grass roots experience of NGOs. The caucus further tried to find wording which would protect the PFA's significance in international law, in view of attacks upon the whole document by a determined group of opponents. Some protection would be afforded, we suggested, if human rights education were to be made a core component of education "at all levels and throughout the life cycle, by the year 2004". Women should know their human rights and be able to access legal recourse against any violation of their rights.

This suggestion is not in the draft report going to Beijing plus Five but there is a call for improvements in women's legal literacy and recognition of the work of NGOs in supporting women's human rights, adoption of the CEDAW protocol and the establishment of an International Criminal Court. Also the draft political declaration, submitted by the Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee, reaffirmed ECOSOC's commitment to the goals and objectives of PFA.

Our concern to protect the status of the Platform for Action was visibly justified on March 7th, when the CSW meeting was invaded by some 320 men-in-grey-suits and very young women, all wearing badges marked Motherhood. When challenged, they described themselves as pro-family. They ran a well organised programme of attendance at caucuses and were clearly out to have much of the Platform for Action repealed. This was made plain in widely circulated copies of an email (17.12.99) which described the Beijing Platform for Action as "one of the most radical and dangerous documents". It claimed that the radical feminists in Beijing had promoted abortion as an international human right and had attacked the traditional family (i.e. married couples). It emphasised the importance of opposing radical feminists, who would be "EVER YWHERE. They are already holding meetings all over the world". It offered to train volunteers "especially ... young people... to counter radical youth that our opponents pay to come.. "It promised to obtain accreditation of volunteers, a claim which led to investigation by CSW officers. Quote: "We are the children of Abraham arising to fight for faith any family" .

Elizabeth took a copy of this hysterical document to the New York Times in the hope that a reporter would come to interview some of Abraham's children. She herself spoke to some very young women and was told that she should understand that motherhood was a vocation. As a multiparous grandmother, she was unimpressed. So were the young women in the NGOs and delegations, who quickly produced badges "Youth for Women's Rights". This sort of opposition to women's equality and women's right to choose was apparent in Beijing and has arisen ever since, though not in such an organised form. It is embodied in the argument over equality (meaning women having equal rights with men) and equity (meaning women having rights appropriate to their - subordinate - status).

It is essential, of course, to protect open debate and free expression of opposing views. "Motherhood" abused this right, behaving intimidatngly in caucuses, lobbying young women and removing from the conference rooms copies of literature they opposed. This included a paper by the Centre of Reproductive Law and Policy exposing myths and disinformation put about regarding contraception. "Motherhood's anti-democratic behaviour was checked by the stewards and skilfully denounced by the German delegation in the last plenary session of the CSW meeting.

March 8th, International Women's Day brought a much more constructive programme, with speeches celebrating progress towards equality from several CSW leaders and moving testimonies from Women in Black against Violence, which reminded us of how much still needs to be done world-wide to remove areas of brutal persecution and discrimination. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan gave an impressive speech, affirming UN commitment to women's equality and its belief that gender equality is inextricably linked to world peace and development. A highlight was provided by Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury (Bangladesh), President of the UN Security Council. Members of the Security Council, he affirmed, recognised that (women's) "full participation in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts" was essential and recognised that (women) were "still under represented in decision-making in regard to conflict". The Council would pursue "an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes at all levels while addressing armed or other conflicts." This is a major advance in Security Council policy.

ECOSOC and CONGO

So far, INLW delegates have been able to attend CSW through our membership of Liberal International, which is accredited to ECOSOC (UN Economic and Social Committee). As we meet the necessary criteria, however, we are seeking accreditation in our own right. Our application was submitted in May 1999 and we hope to hear the results by the end of the year. Meanwhile, we have become an Associate Member of CONGO (Conference of Nongovernmental Organisations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations). CONGO, founded 50 years ago, "facilitates the participation of NGOs in United Nations debates and decisions". It has many committees for co-ordinating NGO views on specific issues and helps to ensure that these are taken into account in UN Conferences. It provides assistance to member NGO in their dealings with the UN (in particular, with the UN Division for the Advancement of Women). Elizabeth visited CONGO offices whilst in New York and paid INLW's Associate Membership subscription.

CONGO operates from New York, Geneva and Vienna. It seeks NGO representatives in each location and we are delighted that Jeannine de Boccard is able to be our representative in Geneva.



Annete Lou, now Vice President of Taiwan, speaking to the Women's Meeting, Taipei, 21 February 2000. Left, Elizabeth Sideny, Chari, INLW.

Interview at Le Monde, 20 May 2000

Participants at the Women's Meeting. Taipei, 21 February 2000, stand below INLW's banner. Left, Bi-Khim Hsiao, DPP Director of International Affairs. Second right, Elizabeth Sidney





Jeannine de Bocard, INLW representative at CONGO, Geneva, and Elizabeth Sidney, at the CSW Meeting, United Nations, 8 March 2000