

NEW YORK MARKS 'BEIJING +5'
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A large, joyful and diverse contingent of women, along with a small band of men, poured into the New York Culture Center on June 10 to hear electrifying updates on the condition, treatment, health and future of the world's women.

Earlier in the week, all of the speakers had participated in the United Nations' "Beijing +5" gathering, a series of meetings that studied the progress — or lack thereof — achieved by the world's women in the wake of the historic Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

SGI-USA in New York sponsored the June 10 "Dialogue With the Women of the World," while SGI, as a non-governmental organization affiliated with the United Nations, had participated in the "Beijing +5" conference.

The speakers were as diverse as the audience and addressed a wide array of women's matters, noting some recent breakthroughs for women, as well as disturbing incidents of regression.

UNESCO official Ingeborg Breines spoke about the organization's work to promote the theme of "Women and the Culture of Peace." She noted that while industrialized Northern states have long sought equality for women, and Southern hemisphere nations have pursued women's development, there is little focus on women's efforts for peace.

Within UNESCO, peace is not construed merely as the absence of war. "We need systems for peace education as sophisticated as those currently in place for military training," Breines said.

The speaker noted that it will be necessary to elect more women to political office to secure a culture that values peace.

She also praised women who have made concrete efforts for peace, including Russian mothers who have gone to Chechnya to fetch their soldier sons, saying they "... prefer a living son to a medal."

Panelist Mu Sochua, the Cambodian Minister for Women's and Veteran's Affairs, mesmerized the audience with her accounts of the rebuilding of her nation following the carnage of the Pol Pot regime.

"I'm really sorry to talk about war, but war is all I have known in my 47 years," she said.

Ms. Sochua thanked the SGI for sending 300,000 radios to Cambodia, a gift that enabled many rural citizens to learn about human rights and participate in the nation's first democratic elections in 1993.

She, too, cited the key importance of democratic politics in advancing the status of women, noting strong efforts currently underway in Cambodia to elect women to higher-level offices. Placing women in senior Cambodian government positions is critically important now because the nation has a serious problem of the trafficking of girls into prostitution, and women leaders most likely would work hard to end the problem, she said.

Mavluda Shirinova, the founder of Uzbekistan's first crisis shelter for women, spoke about the cultural upheavals her country has undergone since it achieved its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991.

Ms. Shirinova noted that although Uzbekistan's law guarantees basic rights for women, its cultural traditions undercut such freedoms, making physical and emotional abuse of women far too common.

She said securing women's rights in Uzbekistan may take a long time, given the deeply ingrained belief in male superiority and a husband's right to use force against a wife.

Astrid Bant, the Latin American program officer for the International Women's Health Coalition, described the great difficulties involved in making health services accessible in that region.

Ms. Bant also called for new definitions of the concept of women's health, noting that "Health in Latin American is still discussed in terms of mortality and the availability of medicines."

"But you can also look at how you produce healthy people," she said.

Panelist Abena Busia, a poet born in Ghana, read sections from her own work.

Ms. Busia encouraged the audience to take a positive view of any difficulties women are undergoing in their efforts to achieve progress.

In a remark oddly reminiscent of the Buddhist concept that obstacles precede victory, she said: "We should celebrate the resistance because it really is a sign of our success."