

I am Audrey Kühler-Oostra from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and was allowed to represent the Netherlands Association of Women Graduates (VVAO) at the Beijing+5 NGO conference. At the time I was VVAO's Coordinator International Relations and I witnessed this heartrending meeting of the women of the world together with my predecessor. I shall never forget all the colours of the Indigenous Women on their way to the conference rooms, the ladies from Africa and the Caribbeans with their wonderful headdresses and the sense of solidarity on the streets round the UN buildings when Kofi Annan welcomed us or when we were running to catch a bus.

Hillary Clinton delivered a wonderful speech about microcredit. No wonder she won over her husband to get to know more details about the system!

Two important encounters are in my opinion worth recounting:

I met a young woman from the North east of the States who was becoming very worried, even scared, that the liberals at the meetings would dictate that she could not live her family life according to her religious beliefs, and that abortion would become the rule. I tried to reassure her that to my convictions liberals- at least in Holland- live and let live and do not mingle in a person's private life as long as one does not infringe on other people's freedoms or break the law. One can make one's own private choices, I said, while on the contrary I felt that there were many conservative religious leaders who were prohibitive of women exercising their human rights.

I am afraid I could not convince her, she kept on giving out flyers with the wrong information.

After an interesting session about women's reproductive rights and sexual choices two gentlemen from Kenya and Namibia, who could not believe what they had heard, because in their countries sex is a great taboo and they never knew lesbians existed, asked me what the situation was like in Holland. So I told them that Amsterdam had just hosted the Gay Games and that it had been quite moving to see people of the same sex from all countries of the world in the parks and the streets just happily holding hands. That homosexuality was absolutely no problem in the cities, but maybe a little more in the rural areas. They were quite stunned, and I wonder what they reported to their delegations.

Needless to say I sat out the last night and stayed awake till dawn when the Outcome Document was agreed upon: we took turns all day and night to impress the governmental representatives that the women of the world were witnessing all the difficulties they had putting our rights into wording.

I still wear the T-shirt Amnesty International gave us when we were ticked off for applauding a progressive government's representative and a conservative country's diplomat asked the convener to vacate the public balcony of the meeting room for security reasons, because UN's conventions are a result of consensus. The convener just warned us and we wore the white shirts from then on with the text: NO GOING BACK ON WOMENS RIGHTS!

Audrey Kühler-Oostra Amsterdam.