



A wooden bowl is handed by Minister Lulu Xingwana to the Minister of State for Women and Child Development of India, symbolising the fact the India will be hosting the next World Congress for Rural Women

4th World Congress of Rural Women

by Hanlie du Plessis

Over 2 000 women from more than 60 countries across the world, gathered in Durban to attend the 4th World Congress for Rural Women. The slogan for this congress clearly spelt out the objective and specific aims – “United in our diversity: Working together towards the total emancipation of rural women from poverty and hunger”.

Where did it begin?

The first congress took place in 1994 in Melbourne, Australia. Mary Salce from Australia is the founder member of the congress. A bowl carved from wood is used to symbolically hand over the congress to the next host country. Four years later in 1998, the second congress was held in Washington. Spain received the bowl and the third World Congress for Rural Women was held in Madrid in 2002. Here it was decided that the next congress should take place in Africa, and South Africa was chosen to be the proud host for 2007.

The congress became a unique platform for rural women from all over the world to address their specific challenges. In spite of their diversity, they found common ground in their sincere aim to better the circumstances for their descendants.

Challenges for rural women

It came as no surprise that the very same issues raised at the first congress in Melbourne, are still challenging rural women today. A lack of infrastructure still seemed to be the main hurdle that women living in distantly situated places need to overcome. Other real obstacles like poverty, ill health, lack of safety and security, and illiteracy can be linked directly to the fact that these women need to cope without an infrastructure. Better access to finance, better roads, electricity, water and education for themselves and their children will help these women to free themselves from the poverty trap they were caught in for generations.

Addressing the delegates at the gala banquet the Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, said: "A developmental state is one that allows markets to work and intervene on the side of the poor when markets fail. The provision of basic education, water, access roads, electricity and health services are services which government has an obligation to progressively expand so that the poorest sections of our community can break out of the cycle of poverty."

He continued by warning the attendees: "However, while governments have a clear role to intervene on behalf of your constituency, it is important for rural women not to become passive recipients of whatever is thrown at them. Organise yourselves, shout from the rooftops when your rights are being trampled and pressure your governments to act on your behalf, not for self interest, but to make the lives of rural women less burdensome."

Does the congress achieve its goals?

One can ask what good is it to have a congress every fourth year, if the challenges stay the same? The fourth World Congress for Rural Women was indeed different from the previous three. Firstly, this congress was hosted and directed by our Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, Lulu Xingwana. With her focus being agriculture, this congress was more solution orientated. Through agriculture there is a real, attainable solution. Previous congresses were presented from a more socio-economic point of view with the inevitable focus on charity.

Secondly, it was decided to have an interim congress on each continent in two years' time. This will provide the opportunity to critically evaluate the progress made towards achieving the goals set by this congress.

The congress adopted a 21-point declaration on 25 April 2007. The points were grouped under the headings Economic, Social, Peace and Security, and Governance. Minister Xingwana closed the congress with a final call upon the people of the rest of the world to support rural women's endeavours to change the world for the betterment of all its people by improving the social and economic circumstances of rural women. **UM**



The different countries represented at the congress each got a chance to pour cups of coloured sand into glass representation of the African continent



Australian Mary Salce, the congress's founding member, addresses delegates