

## Look at the World through Women's Eyes

### **The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Beijing, China**

**Cate Johnson**

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was held to examine and appraise progress made by UN Member States in advancing the economic and social status of women in their countries. Realizing that many commitments agreed upon

by individual governments at the Third World Conference on Women (Nairobi, 1985) had failed to be implemented, the UN held this strategic conference to delineate a number of global obstacles to women's advancement and specific actions which can be taken to alleviate them. A Platform for Action was drafted, negotiated, and signed by all participating countries.

A parallel NGO Forum was held during the Official Conference. The Forum Site had been moved to Huairou, a small resort town that was

a 1-1/2 hour bus ride from Beijing. Some cross-fertilization occurred between the NGO Forum and Official Conference; however, logistics and conference organization did not enable a rich dialogue between these two groups to occur.

"Equality, Development, and Peace" was the theme of the NGO Forum. Enlightening, inspiring, thrilling—and exhausting!—nearly 30,000 women from all walks of life throughout the world converged to express their opinions on such diverse topics as violence against women, female genital mutilation, women's legal rights, and HIV/AIDS. Largely focused on human rights issues, nearly 350 workshops were given each day. Women met together to discuss specific areas of interest, network for action-oriented "next steps" within their specific countries.

Through the rain, the mud, the collapsed tents, the difficulty of finding workshop locations, and the sheer logistics of managing 30,000 women, a spirit of unity and determination prevailed. These were women who had come for a specific purpose: to tell the world about the difficult and intolerable situations present in their countries, often reinforced by hostile governments and upheld by societies with entrenched traditions blocking women's access to judicial systems, health services, jobs, and inheritance rights. It is easy to forget that in many parts of the world female feticide is a common means of ensuring a male heir, that girls will not be enrolled in school or forced to leave earlier than boys, that women do not have equal rights under the law to inheritance or even custody of their children, that domestic violence is a problem that plagues all societies. These were the issues that women were bringing to the world's attention in Beijing and Huairou.

And the world listened. A con-

### **What You Expect, You Get**

**Tony McCoy**

The wind blew the heavy, cold rain sideways as we waited under our umbrellas for admittance to Hillary Clinton's speech. It was September 5, in Huairou, China, site of the NGO Forum on Women.

Four of us had arrived two hours early, hoping to get a good seat in the open air plaza where the First Lady was scheduled to address the Forum. After ten minutes of taking shelter under the large table umbrella we realized that we could have almost any seat and that the sound equipment was being dismantled.

And so we scurried to wait in front of the Plenary building whose auditorium held perhaps a tenth as many people as the plaza. When the door opened we knew there would be a surge forward so I kept a close eye on escape routes if the press of bodies became unmanageable. But two hours passed with no movement. The crowd sang a little, we took photographs of each other and the colorful scene, but mostly we just waited.

In front of us a number of Chinese men were linking elbows and moving quietly to form a human barricade, cutting the waiting crowd in half. The media immediately surged forward to capture their faces, forming another blockade.

Later, that small incident with the Chinese men took on symbolic importance for me. I heard some of the participants recount that moment with comments about how cruel and hard the men looked. Others, like me, noted that the men had been young and shivering.

The difference seems to lie in the assumptions that we started with. Some were convinced that the Chinese authorities would make every effort to obstruct the Forum. Others assumed that these same authorities would make every effort to avoid an "international incident" and saw the line of men as effective crowd control.

Reviewing the press reports afterwards, much of the coverage reflected the first assumption, making the Chinese hosts the story and obscuring the real significance of both the Forum and the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing. □

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sensus document was signed by all participating governments with remarkably little conflict. Building on the Cairo and Copenhagen Platforms for Action (1994, 1995), the Beijing PFA seeks to set out an Agenda for Action by governments which would foster an environment of equality for women throughout all walks of life. Fifty-three Strategic Objectives have been delineated, recommending that Governments take action on such topics as poverty, education, health, violence, human rights, and the girl child. Hunger issues can be addressed through refugee issues, microenterprise, policy reform, human and legal rights, and health. (The word "Hunger" is mentioned twice in the document, once in the Paragraph 47 under the "Women and Poverty" section and once in Paragraph 131 under the "Women and Armed Conflict" section).

Had it not been for the testimony of the thousands of women attending the NGO Forum (both in Beijing and in Cairo), such rapid progress toward women's rights would not have been made. Perhaps Governments would not be ready and willing to acknowledge the inequalities that face women each day, and recommend specific actions to establish an equal basis to alleviate these problems.

Since Beijing, many governments

## Critical Areas of Concern

Addressed in the Platform for Action

1. Persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women.
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in an unequal access to education and training.
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services.
4. Violence against women.
5. The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation.
6. Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources.
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels.
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women.
9. Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women.
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media.
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment.
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

have continued to maintain the dialogue begun in Beijing. But regardless of what Governments do (or fail to do!), our challenge is to pick up the momentum of positive, dynamic energy generated at Beijing and implement the Platform in all aspects of our programming, ensuring a positive impact on women's lives throughout the world. □

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## Highlights from Beijing

### Gloria Scott

Despite progress women have made in the last decades and the vast improvements in their situation a wide gender gap persists in the world:

- fewer girls than boys attend primary schools and illiteracy rates are rising faster among women;
- 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are females;
- women and their dependent children form the majority of



Islamic women demonstrate outside the Plenary Session at the Beijing World Conference on Women. Photo: Cate Johnson

- the 23 million refugees;
- women's wages are typically only 60-70 percent of those earned by men;
- women are less likely to hold management positions in the workplace or in public service.

These are some of the issues that the two conferences in Beijing were about—the non-governmental (NGO) forum entitled, "LOOK AT THE WORLD THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES"; and the official UN Fourth World Conference on Women aimed at EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE and prioritizing action to advance women and benefit society as a whole.

The purpose of the official conference was to finalize the Platform for Action. I have highlighted the discussion of specific sections below:

In the HEALTH concern the new and startling issue since Nairobi was the AIDS pandemic. The incidence of infection is growing most rapidly among young women in the 20s age group, and older women who are not infected bear a double burden because of the loss of income earners in the family and the orphans left in their care.

VIOLENCE against women is now discussed more openly and is recognized as a problem across all socioeconomic groups. Its increase with socioeconomic deterioration and recognition of violence as a health problem are the new dimensions.

POVERTY is a continuing concern. The new dimension is the increasing feminization of poverty including increased numbers of female-headed households which are poorer than the average. The UNDP set up a Poverty clock which in the 10 days of the NGO Forum counted 541,228 babies born to mothers in poverty (living on less than US \$1 per day). The new dimension in the discussion of ECONOMIC JUSTICE was the impact on women's lives of macro-economic policies and economic globalization, which has been gathering

steam throughout the era of structural adjustment, recession and high unemployment, all of which have differential impacts on women. The women of Latin America and the Caribbean (where women have been particularly affected) organized a demonstration at the Conference Center, effectively blocking access between two floors for about two hours. There is concern re: the valuation of women's unpaid work and the gender empowerment measure (GEM) was proposed as an indicator of women's access to economic and political opportunities. MicroBanking, to increase women's access to credit and economic resources received a great deal of attention.

1991-2000 is the decade for the GIRL CHILD which was addressed as a separate population group for the first time. Girls are at higher risk of dying under 5 despite their biological advantage of higher resistance to disease. More than 1 million girl babies die each year from malnutrition, neglect and abuse simply because they are girls and many traditional practices further increase their risk.

The increased awareness about the issues, the tremendous amount of research in preparation for the conference and all the publications that were available; the parallel panel discussions and workshops organized by UN agencies and NGOs; the networking and mutual strengthening through exchanges of views; and the initiation of young women on their country's delegations all are significant. There is a clear role in the follow-up to the Conference for the well-organized NGO community to continue advocacy, exert political pressure to ensure continued attention to women's issues and the agreements reflected in the Platform; to assist in actual implementation of the Platform and to spread information to grass roots groups. □

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## Beijing Conference Focus Day on Rural Women

### Agnes Quinsumbing

Actions and policies to improve rural women's welfare were discussed during a panel on rural women organized by FAO at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing on September 7, 1995. The morning session, entitled "Rural Women: Issues and Challenges Beyond Beijing," focused on women's roles in agriculture and food security in two panels. Chaired by Ms. Victoria Sekitoleko (FAO), the first panel presented a broad overview of rural women, food systems, and agriculture, followed by a presentation by the World Bank on rural financing. The latter drew on case studies of NGO efforts in Asia to improve access to, and sustainability of, financial services for women. Chief Bisi Ogunleye, a hereditary chief in Nigeria, spoke about grassroots efforts to empower rural women. She brought product samples from rural women's groups, and said that such products would henceforth be marketed with a stamp indicating that they were made by rural women. Women as guardians of plant biodiversity was then discussed (IPGRI) with reference to gender and indigenous farming systems. The second panel dealt with gender and food security issues. Representatives from IFAD, WFP, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers, and IFPRI discussed food aid in emergencies and the necessity of targeting rural women for food security programs.

The final session provided lessons learned from actual FAO/UNFPA project experience in rural China. The experience from this project suggests that projects that improve women's economic opportunities may be more effective than stand-alone family planning programs that do not address women's economic needs. □

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