

"Keep on Moving Forward": NGO Forum on Women, Beijing, China

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This article describes the NGO Forum which met in conjunction with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in September 1995. The author summarizes the content of the largest United Nations (UN) gathering, the role of NGOs, and the final UN document: the Platform for Action. She then describes the IASSW symposium and its resolutions.

To promote the role of women in society, nongovernmental organizations, commonly referred to as NGOs, recently held a forum in the Chinese town of Huairou, close to Beijing. Between August 30 and September 8, 1995, women from every corner of the world descended upon this rural Chinese site to share their struggles and triumphs.

The NGO forum met one week before the United Nations World Conference on Women convened in Beijing. The UN conference consisted of official governmental delegates, while the NGO forum was open to everyone. NGO forums and UN women's conferences have always been parallel events, with NGOs providing recommendations to UN delegates. By holding their forum in conjunction with the UN conference, NGOs have greater influence on the final conference document, the *Platform for Action*.

Each day, the forum presented almost 400 events. Workshops, panels, training programs, and exhibits focused on various themes: arts, culture, economy, education, health, human rights, media and information, politics, race and ethnicity, religion, and science. Violence against women and sexual exploitation dominated many topics and demonstrations. Attention also centered on methods of transforming existing economic and social structures. Ultimate objectives of the wide-ranging events included (a) setting an agenda for the global movement of women, (b) networking and celebrating, and (c) influencing the United Nations conference in Beijing.

About 30,000 persons attended the NGO forum. Participants at the UN conference totaled about 17,000, which included representatives from 181 UN member states (Walker, 1995). Total attendance at the forum and conference made this the largest

gathering ever of women and men in connection with a UN global conference. (While the number of men attending the forum or conference was vastly less than that of women, men did participate in the activities.)

The most striking aspect of the NGO forum was that of diversity. Participants represented all social levels, from indigenous groups to those with university affiliations. Linguistic differences added to the international flavor of the forum. As women met in tents, buses, and streets, they communicated in every language imaginable. Colorful saris, exotic dresses, intricate cloths, and common blue jeans enhanced the overall snapshot of diversity. Despite enormous differences in background, women at the forum exhibited solidarity. Concerns about equality of rights and transformation of existing power structures linked participants together. From early morning until late evening, constant energy reaffirmed a profound awareness and understanding of issues facing women and society.

Originally, Beijing was to have hosted the forum. However, a few months before the date of the forum, its location was changed to Huairou. The Chinese government officially stated that it could better provide for the forum at Huairou than Beijing. Rumors at the forum questioned the official version, surmising that the Chinese government had feared political activity by forum participants. As a means of dampening outspoken forum members, the Chinese took steps to isolate participants. The result was moving the forum site to Huairou. Regardless of why the forum was relocated to Huairou, the bustle and density of Beijing with its several million residents could not have been more different than the environment at Huairou. The pace of life at Huairou was relaxed as children played leisurely in parks and peddlers politely marketed their wares. Lush vegetation cropped up everywhere. At night, colorful lights displayed towers and houses. Since most delegates could not speak Mandarin Chinese, volunteer translators from Beijing University occupied main points of the town to help delegates communicate with their hosts. Unfortunately, because the number of participants exceeded translators, conversations with the hospitable local residents remained difficult.

The forum site occupied much of Huairou. Groups occupied schools, libraries, sports arenas, hotels, a convention center, and even tents (e.g., Youth Tent, African Tent, Peace Tent, Global Tent, Future Tent). The conference site included a communications center where journalists and others could send E-mail messages to their home countries. Next to the center, a radio station connected to the forum beamed its reports throughout the world. Underneath the communications center, a women's bazaar sold items from NGO projects operating in home countries. Profits from those sales were allocated to fund future projects. A nearby bookstore stocked materials about forum issues. Several participants posted banners on fences and walls with slogans about their concerns. For instance, two banners read: "All issues are women's issues" and "Women's

rights are human rights." To help provide accommodation, the Chinese government requested local residents to give up their apartments and allow forum participants to stay in the vacated homes. While hotels also provided housing for many NGO members, some had to stay in Beijing and commute daily to the forum.

Because of space limitations, opening ceremonies of the forum were held in the National Olympic Stadium in Beijing. Convoys of buses hauled thousands of women from Huairou to Beijing to attend the opening, where an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 people gathered. This mass exodus from Huairou turned the forum site into what resembled a ghost town ("A Day," 1995). As one of the most impressive opening events, representatives of each continent addressed the audience in their own language. A 100-woman symphony orchestra played a mixture of classical Western and Chinese music. Then, more than 5,000 performers displayed all types of folk and modern dance routines. The dancers also inflated a large, elongated balloon bearing the symbol of the forum in both English and Chinese, which sailed into the sky above the stadium. At the close of the cultural extravaganza, 20,000 doves ascended into the air to signify peace. Finally, before leaving the stadium, the audience sang continuously the theme song, "Keep on Moving Forward." While spectacular, the opening ceremony could also be seen as Chinese propaganda intended to gloss over a militaristic and oppressive regime. The portrayal of peace and good will to all did not accurately reflect China's behavior as host of the forum.

Overcoming Obstacles

Communication between NGO participants and UN conference delegates became tedious. For instance, travel to Beijing from Huairou was difficult and extremely limited during the first 3 days of the forum. Many participants did not stay in Huairou but had to commute as long as 2 hours from Beijing. Evenings, some bus services completely stopped, which required many participants to leave Huairou and miss cultural events presented at night. In addition to imposing travel restrictions at the forum site, the Chinese government had denied official visas to thousands of women wanting to attend the forum. Many participants simply never received their official visas. While some of those who had failed to obtain a visa managed to slip into China on a tourist visa, many were unable to fulfill their desire of attending the forum.

Those at the forum questioned why China, with its restrictive policies on travel and human rights, was chosen for this significant gathering. Why select a host that is going to make it difficult to attend? No easy answers exist. China actively pursued the role of hosting the forum and conference. Hosting these events offered the Chinese an opportunity to show the world that it was part of the world community. However, suspicions about political expression apparently persuaded the Chinese government to

tread carefully with its arrangements for the forum and conference. Only selected Chinese women's groups were allowed to participate, and the general population did not have access to any events. The Chinese government dictated to its citizens what they could discuss. Omnipresent security checks conveyed an impression of constantly being watched. In spite of the Chinese government's restrictions on travel and political discussion, the Chinese people were gracious and inviting hosts. The media did not give local residents sufficient coverage or credit for their hospitality to those attending the forum. Journalists focused on negative aspects of the forum but omitted reporting on substantive aspects, especially the tremendous vitality of women in their shared struggles.

In spite of governmental obstacles and pouring rains, forum participants persevered as they attended cultural events, demonstrations, workshops, and numerous other activities. Women with different cultural and political backgrounds shared their experiences. They marched together to end violence against women and children and listened to narrations of human rights violations. From discussions at forum activities, members documented violations and suggested changes to existing conditions for presentation to UN delegates. The ultimate goal was to demand accountability and implementation of proposed changes by UN member countries.

Nongovernmental Organizations

"NGO" refers to a private nonprofit or voluntary entity, of which many types exist. Those NGOs active in women's issues attended the forum. At the forum one NGO called itself Maori Women, whose purpose is to assist women and children in New Zealand suffering from sex abuse and other forms of violence. Another NGO is the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a group against nuclear proliferation. NGOs also promoted the rights of the girl child and countless other causes. The purpose of an NGO is to help women strengthen their organizational capacity. Local and national NGOs meet to discuss their experiences and articulate needs. Being an active participant in this type of group often leads to a sense of accomplishment (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

NGOs initially addressed economic, political, and social conditions of women at a base level. The NGOs generally did not attempt to change existing economic and political structures but concentrated on improving immediate needs of women. For instance, under this initial grass roots approach, an NGO may advocate a program for servicing victims of violence but not include a program to change the cultural or legal acceptance of the violence.

Criticism has arisen against the grass roots approach of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, instead of bringing about change on a governmental level. This complaint

focuses on the ineffectiveness of the grass roots approach to transform essential power structures. While an NGO working at a grass roots level may improve targeted conditions, that NGO may accomplish little in terms of eliminating underlying causes of the conditions (Goetz, 1995; Razavi & Miller, 1995). Therefore, the goal of NGOs has broadened to include that of transforming power structures, since "the tools of the master will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984). However, aside from criticism about the grass roots approach, NGO activities directed at basic needs are still crucial to improving the overall situation of women.

The vitality of the NGO stems from its operation outside official bureaucracies, which enables it to take positions on issues without restrictions often imposed on governmental organizations. Governments usually have a more difficult time controlling the activism and voice of an NGO than an official group. The NGOs do not take formal action, and no formal interchange between the forum and the UN delegation occurs. The interaction is informal, and NGO participants submit their resolutions and recommendations to the UN delegates. The NGO participants often lobby UN delegates, which can influence the UN delegation (U.S. State Department, 1995). The NGO concerns and recommendations are submitted to the delegates and then reflected in the final UN document: the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. The UN recognizes the "growing strength of the non-governmental sector, particularly women's organization and feminist groups have become a driving force for change. NGOs have played an important advocacy role in advancing legislation or mechanism to ensure the promotion of women (United Nations, 1995b).

Global Conferences and Women

In 1975, the UN proclaimed that the next 10 years would be the Decade of Women. In that same year, as part of the women's decade, the UN held its first World Conference on Women in Mexico City. At the end of that decade, in 1985, the UN held another world conference in Nairobi, Kenya, to evaluate achievements of the Decade of Women. At Nairobi, the UN finally acknowledged that "gender specific violence is increasing and governments must affirm the dignity of women as a priority action" (United Nations, 1986b). To highlight the inequality of women in society, the UN developed *The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies* (1986a) document calling for specific actions to promote women's rights.

At a World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna during 1993, participants declared women's rights to be human rights, meaning women are entitled to the same level of health, political, and economic benefits as men. A lesser standard would be viewed as a violation of human rights. This 1993 conference also focused on gender-specific abuse, which refers to "any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely

to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women" (United Nations, 1995a).

One year later, in Cairo, Egypt, an international conference on population and development recognized women's health and rights as cornerstones of effective development policy. A link exists between physical and mental health of women and inequality. Where women encounter less violence, the level of human rights is greater. In 1995, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark, governments acknowledged that, to combat poverty and social disintegration, women would have to attain equality (U.S. State Department, 1995). While conferences about women have been numerous, much still needs to be compiled in the area of women's rights.

Symposium on Human Rights and Violence against Women by the IASSW

At the forum, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), through its women's caucus, presented a symposium on human rights and violence against women. As an NGO, the IASSW has consultative status with the UN and represents schools of social work all over the world. Participation at the forum in Huairou by the IASSW was the first organized social work gathering at a UN women's meeting (Wetzel Wood, 1995; J. Wetzel Wood, personal communication, October 6, 1995). The women's caucus represented women's issues within the IASSW.

The symposium highlighted an international human rights approach to counter the view that domestic violence is a cultural norm. International publicity and support for eradication of gender-specific violence has led to greater knowledge about this issue. A higher level of awareness could prompt governments into improving their response and prevention of domestic violence. In defining violence, governments need to acknowledge diverse cultural backgrounds, social environments, and different levels of resources. Gender-based violence includes interpersonal, institutional, cultural, and structural violence.

About 200 women and men from 27 countries attended the 4-hour symposium. Those submitting abstracts included persons from the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Ethiopia, Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Israel, Korea, Macedonia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Ukraine (J. Wetzel Wood, personal communication, October 6, 1995).

Participants divided themselves into groups, based on the following themes involving violence against women and children: intervention against violence from an individual, small group, and family perspective; strategies to prevent global violence; poverty as violence against women; violence in the lives of female refugees and displaced women; social action against violence and effective social change; research on violence and teaching methods; and women who kill their batterers. Group members then presented papers they had prepared prior to the forum and addressed questions. At the end of each session, a moderator summarized the group's topic and the related discussion. Following the symposium, five participants drafted resolutions for submission to schools of social work as well as UN delegates attending the women's conference. Those recommendations consisted of elements derived from a model called "Global Zeitgeist," which recognizes that, although women all over the world strive for equality, they may not consciously consider themselves activists for women's rights. Global Zeitgeist is based on a synthesis of programs initiated by women for personal, social, and economic development which have proved successful worldwide (Weitzel Wood, 1993, 1995).

The 10 essential resolutions originating from the symposium are as follows:

1. Look to the women, listen to the women: Always begin with the personal experience of indigenous and local women, generalizing then to state, national, and international policies so the connections between all forms of violence become clear.
2. Require economic self-determination: Women must lead and define economic and development policies and programs that impact communities. Current policies leave women with a heritage of destruction in health, environment, education, livelihood, culture, and autonomy. Investment priority must be in the human community.
3. Free women from fear and domination: War, dislocation, state-sponsored violence, and violence in the street and in the home feed the epidemic. It is a fundamental human right of all women and children to live with respect and without fear.
4. Value all women's work: The invisibility and undervaluing of women's work must stop.
5. Place women in decision-making positions: With women's personal development, relevant social development and action is not only possible but most appropriate and successful.
6. Promote shared responsibilities in all forms of family and social partnerships: Human rights include equal sharing of home care and family care. Respect for all forms of human families is basic to promoting human rights and building healthy communities.

7. Invest in health care and education: The prevention of women's physical and mental illness requires access to appropriate and affordable health services. Literacy, numeracy, and other forms of basic education improve women's economic status, delay pregnancies, and better educate future generations.

8. Educate all women regarding their legal rights and other laws pertinent to them: Include the legal education and execution of critical analyses and the development of corrective laws and policies.

9. Promote positive perceptions of and by women: Within the context of human rights, acknowledge differences and the value of diversity.

10. Press for relevant gender-specific data collection and research: Consider new models, such as participation research, whereby women themselves select the issues and guide the design, analyses, and implementation of results.

The symposium offered an important opportunity to exchange information and meet counterparts from all over the world. By attending the symposium, IASSW played a role in developing resolutions and influencing the *Platform for Action*.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The UN conference at Beijing was the Fourth World Conference of Women, with the first having been held in 1975 at Mexico City. One of the primary goals of the conference was to formulate a *Platform for Action*. NGOs had substantial input into this document, which promotes equality, development, and peace for all women. The platform is committed to ensuring equality of women and girl children as integral to human rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 1995a). The platform proposed necessary actions by government and the private sector in overcoming obstacles to the advancement of women's rights in the following areas of critical concern: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic participation, power sharing and decision making, national and international mechanisms, human rights, mass media, environment and development, and the social role and treatment of the girl child. The platform addressed each of those areas in hopes of developing methods to intervene strategically, locally and internationally.

Prior to the conference, governments had failed to support numerous issues in areas of critical concern. To note in the initial draft of the platform document that those issues lacked UN consensus, authors of the document enclosed the issues in brackets (Wetzel Wood, 1995). However, by the close of the conference, governments had achieved consensus on many of the bracketed issues, including a wide-ranging declaration of women's rights (United Nations, 1995a).

Conclusion

The NGO forum at Huairou confirmed that social work crosses all borders. The forum instilled a sense of connectedness among women worldwide and conveyed a powerful message that the global women's movement retains strength and vitality. In her mind the author still hears the voices in the opening ceremony, singing "keep on moving forward." Now it is important to continue and grow with this collective knowledge and to transform those energies into local, national, international, and cross-cultural activism.

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