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**PERSPECTIVE ON THE NGO
FORUM ON WOMEN
Huairou, China, 1995**

Tanya Nathan*

I was unsure about whether I should attend the Non-Government Organization (NGO) Forum On Women in China. This conference was scheduled to take place in August and September of 1995 and was affiliated with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Women from grassroots organizations from around the world planned to gather to develop issues to lobby for at the official United Nations Conference. I had heard so much about the powerful 1985 Nairobi conference that it was difficult to imagine missing such an important international event. As a law student with a deep personal commitment to working towards social justice, I was drawn to the NGO Forum. Yet I worried about the expense, about missing law school classes, and most of all, about whether the conference would be worthwhile. Would the conference focus on constructive strategies for improving women's lives or would it merely be a statement, such as "here we all are and we're mad"? Having spent a week at the conference, I can say with certainty that the experience did provide the concrete strategies, ideas, and inspiration for which I had hoped.

Due to the organization of the conference, it was not easy to make plans for attendance on one's own. It was difficult to get information about registration, visas were not granted without hotel confirmation, and hotel confirmations were also quite difficult to obtain. I ended up traveling with a women's lobbying group, organized through China Advocates, a San Francisco

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based tour company which arranges China tours. At first, I was reluctant to attend the conference with this group given the high cost and my general dislike of tour group travelling. However, once in China, I was grateful for the infrastructure provided by the tour group. While others struggled to get information and transportation to the conference site, everything for our group was organized, easy, on time, and even air-conditioned.

The group I traveled with consisted of women from around the United States. Some represented organizations while other members of our group came individually. Some of us were attending only the NGO Forum, while others attended both the NGO Forum and the official United Nations (U.N.) Conference.

The purpose of the NGO Forum was to help develop and shape the U.N. platform on women's rights, through means such as submitting specific language for inclusion in U.N. legal documents. Some members of accredited NGOs secured passes allowing them to oversee the U.N. proceedings, and many of them planned to lobby the U.N. delegates. The process of getting a NGO accredited was apparently both difficult and political, with some of the more radical and controversial groups being denied accreditation. For example, certain Tibetan women's and human rights groups were not accredited because of the controversial and political nature of their work, including their criticism of the Chinese government. While the U.N. Conference attendees were official government delegates, the NGO Forum attendees consisted primarily of women from grassroots movements. A chasm frequently emerged between the stories told by women who came with government sponsored delegations and those who came on their own, as exemplified by some of the Iranian women. A group of Iranian refugees living in Sweden gave testimonials, documented with photos, of terrible oppression of women in Iran, including execution for improper clothing. The government delegation from Iran berated these women, calling them liars and claiming that conditions for women in Iran were quite good.

At the opening night of the NGO Forum, the organizational problems with the conference continued. While 30,000 women were expected for the conference, the site selected for the opening ceremony could accommodate only eight thousand. Luckily for me, the tour group had secured tickets for nearly everyone in our group and spent the afternoon obtaining the few extras so that we could all go. Given the numerous organizational obsta-

cles to attending the conference, I wondered if this was yet another deterrent. Didn't Beijing have a bigger stadium?

The opening night ceremony was held in an open air stadium in Beijing and was packed with a truly international crowd. Gorgeous brightly colored outfits and conversations in many languages swirled around me. The opening night ceremony consisted of marvelously entertaining Chinese music, dance, and entertainment, as well as several speeches. It was a delightful, albeit muggy and apolitical evening. At the end, when twenty thousand white doves were supposed to be released, a much smaller number of white pigeons were let go, and yet it was beautiful. The universal appeal of color, music, and dance made for a good opening to the conference, even if it seemed, as one woman said to me, "more like the half-time entertainment at a football game" than the start of an international women's conference.

Before the NGO Forum began, all participants went to another stadium in Beijing to pick up photo I.D. passes. Although I was able to pick up my I.D. pass the day before the conference began, programs with the conference schedule and workshops were not yet available. We were given a shopping sack full of glossy color brochures on the status of women in China. Judging from these brochures, one would think Chinese women have no problems. I was tempted to throw out the whole bag of brochures, but ended up keeping a few of the more egregious ones. For example, one brochure claimed Tibet was part of China and that Tibetan women were happy and peaceful. Given the ongoing struggle for Tibetan independence, this characterization of Tibetan affairs seemed implausible.

On the first day of the NGO Forum, our tour group bus left our hotel in Beijing at 7:30 a.m., headed for Huairou and the NGO Forum site. As we made the hour long drive to the conference site, we took turns going up to the microphone at the front of our bus, and telling the rest of the group a bit about ourselves and why we came to the conference. Although it initially seemed forced and made me uncomfortable, the experience turned out to be quite moving. I discovered that although the women I was traveling with appeared to be bourgeois, they had rich histories of struggles and triumphs. These women had helped pave the path for women like myself. One woman, a law professor working on criminal guidelines for the war crimes in Bosnia, was one of the first women in her law school class (my class is fifty percent women). Another woman founded a health care clinic of-

fering contraceptives in the rural South. When it was my turn to speak, I told the group that I plan to continue the fight for social justice through the political system. The group clapped and some of the women cried out that I already had their vote.

Most of the women in the group were middle-aged white professionals. I was the youngest woman in the group (except for one woman's preteen daughter) as well as being one of the younger women at the conference. The conference did have a notable youth contingency, which had its own youth tent. I attribute the low attendance by young women and, in the group I traveled with, lower income women and women of color, to the prohibitive costs of attending the conference. Many of the women in my group were university professors whose schools paid for their attendance, while others were professionals, presumably with enough income to finance their own attendance. It seemed that many of the conference attendees, particularly those from the poorer nations, came funded at least in part by their governments. In addition, some women did substantial fundraising in order to get to the conference. The few men who attended the conference appeared to be partners of women attendees, members of the media, or Chinese undercover police.

When we arrived at the conference, we entered the chaos of thousands of lost attendees wandering around Huairou. Huairou is a small, pleasant town in the countryside outside of Beijing. Originally scheduled to be held in Beijing, the NGO Forum was moved to Huairou, perhaps to separate it from the official U.N. Conference, thus making it less influential. Upon arrival, we managed to get conference programs and confusing maps and tried to find the opening plenary session. When we found the session, it was overflowing with attendees and some women were pretty angry about this. I began to select other workshops for the morning. Just sitting on the steps of the plenary session building was enjoyable; there were women everywhere, there was singing, and a number of groups, including Amnesty, were demonstrating.

For the first half hour, I stuck with some women from my group. Since we were all headed in different directions and disagreed about how to read the two unhelpful maps, we split up, hoping to find the workshops we had decided to attend. Even if it took me a while to figure out where things were, I knew I would spend an interesting morning chatting with strangers and exploring my surroundings. As it turned out, these informal con-

versations with women from around the world proved to be an illuminating and informative aspect of attending the NGO Forum. I was surprised and pleased to discover the commonality of our concerns and work, even when we were from vastly different regions and backgrounds.

Deciding which workshops and activities to attend was not easy. The conference program was two hundred pages long, and each two hour time block for each day offered approximately fifty to one hundred choices of different workshops by presenters from around the world. From 9 a.m. until 11 a.m. on the first day, there were 127 workshops offered. In addition, many other activities were scheduled at the various regional and theme tents, for example, making an international peace quilt at the peace tent, and singing Indian women's labor songs in their regional tent.

The range of workshops was staggering, including advocacy training for women leaders, action strategies for breaking the silence on Algerian women, and women's health in Zimbabwe. In a single two hour period, I could have attended a workshop on strategies for abolishing the trafficking of women in Asia, a mid-day meditation group for quiet time and rejuvenation, and workshops on strategies for obtaining healthy water, access to the media, and violence against women in Turkey. I was pleased to see a number of sessions on personal subjects such as relaxation and caring for oneself. Because activists often seem to be, or at least feel, too busy to take time out to care for themselves, I thought this was an important topic for a workshop.

My strategy for choosing among the plethora of enormously interesting workshop options was to select several of the most stimulating workshops in each two hour time block. Sometimes the workshops I chose pertained to my professional life and career aspirations, such as sessions on women's legal rights, economic development, and affordable housing development. At other times, the workshops I selected focused on developing my own personal skills, such as developing skills on how to use the media. These categories, both professional and personal, overlapped substantially. I also attended workshops on topics I knew nothing about, such as issues on agricultural development for rural third world women. I wanted to broaden my knowledge about the issues that activists are working on worldwide, and to see how these issues relate to my own work.

Besides the difficulty of choosing from so many interesting options, I had to select more than one workshop for each time period primarily because it was common to go to a session and find the speaker missing. When this happened, after waiting a while, the group sometimes disbanded and headed for other sessions. On most occasions, however, women would initiate discussion and start telling stories related to the topic at hand. Sometimes the stories were not related, but were generally engrossing nonetheless. The speaker did not show at the first workshop I attended, which focused on banking programs for poor women. However, the lack of an official speaker did not stop us from learning about microcredit programs. In the crowded outdoor tent where the workshop was to be held, a woman from the United States stood amidst the group and started explaining the mechanics of microcredit programs. It was hot and humid, the tent was packed full of women, some arguing about seats, some looking blankly at a speaker whose language they appeared not to comprehend, and others listening intently to the speaker and asking many questions.

As I learned in this discussion, microcredit programs are private lending organizations that loan women anywhere from ten dollars to five thousand dollars on a short term basis at a fairly high interest rate. Recipients generally use the money for starting or expanding upon their own small businesses, a goal which would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, given poor women's lack of access to financial resources. One woman used her loan to rent a vegetable stand in the local marketplace, instead of selling her vegetables off the street as she had previously done. Selling from her stall in the market enabled her to increase her earnings significantly. The lending programs have remarkably high repayment rates ranging between 80 and 98%. Millions of dollars worldwide are presently available for such programs, and they seemed to be a fairly hot topic at the conference judging from the number of workshops focusing on them. A key component of many of these lending programs is their rigid structure. Lenders believe this structure accounts for the high repayment rates. Generally, a group of women take out loans together and participate in training and supportive activities during the loan period. The group shares a mandatory savings pool which can be used if any member of the group defaults on her loan and can also be used for further expansion of their businesses.

Although I thought the microcredit programs seemed like an excellent idea, they also seemed to support low-waged work. However, perhaps even low-waged work is better than no work at all, particularly, as a woman from Fiji pointed out, in countries such as hers which have no welfare or governmental support systems. There was also discussion about whether these lending programs may simply place poor people even further into debt. A man from Pakistan explained that destitute families cannot pay back loans and yet they need the most help. What they need, he said, is to have the money given to them. Despite my reservations, I was delighted to see that women's access to financial resources was a much discussed topic at the conference. I also wondered if such a program would work in the United States and I was fortunate to speak with a woman who runs microcredit programs in Appalachia.

When a woman from Senegal started talking about the microcredit program she works for, which funds about 400 projects, she requested that someone translate her French into English. A Croatian woman quickly volunteered to translate the French into English. In a corner of the tent, a Chinese woman translated the English into Chinese for a group of Chinese women seated there. It was amazing to see how all this worked, even in a workshop with a no-show speaker. Women were at the conference to work and to share ideas and strategies; the lack of a speaker or translator, or other barriers, were not going to impede our progress.

At an international conference, language barriers and translation are clearly major issues. I was surprised to see English was the default language at almost every event I attended. Presenters usually spoke English, and when they did not, someone translated into English. The conference organizers clearly expected that women from non-English speaking countries would either speak English or be with someone who could translate for them. This actually was the case at most of the workshops. At the large plenary sessions, where several thousand women attended and the panelists spoke numerous languages, headsets with simultaneous translation in a multitude of languages were offered. I was impressed with how these sleek little headsets worked and the quality of the truly simultaneous translation. Even with headsets on, we did not seem isolated from each other; there was a lot of nodding and gesturing in the audience towards one another and the speakers.

Some of the workshops were disappointing, including one by the Ms. Foundation about bringing justice to economic development work. Although the facilitator expected to have a discussion among third world women, the attendees were mostly from the United States. The facilitator was unprepared and reluctant to adjust to a different audience. The workshop degenerated into a complaining session full of rhetoric, but no strategy. Many people left; however, some stayed and tried to turn the focus towards strategies for change. Even disappointing sessions like this one prompted me to think about difficult and important questions such as: what work most needs the attention of activists; what people are most in need of such assistance; what are my strongest attributes and how can these skills help; what do I enjoy doing; and how can I mesh all of these issues into my life's work. I think that for many conference participants, the experience was partially about motivation, encouragement, and reaffirmation of goals. Watching the participants at this workshop also prompted me to assess my personal style in activist work. I thought about the role anger plays in social justice work, when it can be effective and necessary, and when it might be alienating and negatively impact one's work. Is anger controllable, and if so, how can it be used effectively without denying one's own feelings?

Many of the workshops involved women sharing stories about their work, whether in economic development, health care, or other areas affecting women's lives. Relaying their experience involved critiquing their approaches and sharing ideas. At the workshop on female genital mutilation, some of the African speakers implored the Western women for help in ending this practice. They focused on education and job opportunities for women as the place to start this work. Many women exchanged names and addresses. I was dismayed to see the undercover Chinese police rushing in to gather this networking information and demanding names and addresses from the African women who were most vocal in their pleas for outside assistance. Although the police were "undercover," once I noticed them, it seemed they were in the background at most conference events.

Some of the workshops were surprisingly basic, such as the one on affordable housing development. Nonetheless, making contacts with women in this area of work was valuable. It was exciting to see the interrelationship between so many of the conference issues at the affordable housing workshop, where we dis-

cussed running businesses from one's own home and the availability of microcredit loans for this purpose. At this workshop, a woman from India stated that creating affordable housing for women, particularly if in the woman's own name, can have the negative result of increasing domestic violence against women. Instead of these issues conflicting, they all seemed important and interconnected, thus emphasizing the value of the NGO Forum as a place for dialogue and working together. There was less ranking and prioritizing of issues than I'd expected, although I imagine more of this happened at the U.N. Conference.

Many of the workshops throughout the conference were absolutely jam-packed, with people peering in through crowded doorways. At some workshops, people video- and audio-taped the session. At "Outlaw Poverty, Not Prostitution," I counted eight video cameras, some of them from international media and some private. At this workshop, I was delighted to meet up with my friends from the Wages for Housework group that I used to volunteer with in San Francisco. They were offering wonderfully organized and progressive workshops on topics such as environmental racism and illegalizing poverty, not prostitution. They want to change the fact that much of women's work is undervalued or not considered worthy of wages. Their struggle to reconceptualize the types of work that society values seems to me to be fundamental in achieving justice for women. At the workshop on prostitution, the point was made that women want the choice to not have to work as prostitutes, but when women do have to do sex work, they want to be treated decently as workers, receive police protection, and not be arrested, criminalized, or harassed by the police. Some prostitutes pay up to 80% of what they earn in fines and a great number of these women are low-income single mothers. The English Prostitutes Collective told of a recent legal victory (litigated by two pro bono attorneys) in which two prostitutes were victorious in a rape suit. The U.N. would not be addressing prostitution, and this group felt this was an outrage, given the significance of this issue for poor women around the world. They organized plans to lobby the U.N. delegates on this topic.

In a plenary session on "Strategies to Address Rising Conservatism," a woman from Roman Catholics for Choice provided excellent strategy tips. She urged activists to be proactive and to develop skills for using the media. She stressed that "the person who shapes the debate rules the discourse" and highlighted the

importance of doing solid research in order to be impeccably accurate in backing up our arguments. She supported activism and claimed "it is not wrong to feel rage over injustices around us." In this same session, an African woman told of the importance of making connections between issues, giving as an example the fact that in the United States you can dial 1-800-SAVE-RWANDA, but that we must also think about who manufactures the guns and grenades used in Rwanda. She urged us to lobby our governments and emphasized the need to be focused, forceful, and to not waste our energy. In a session on "Strategies for Peace," a woman who runs a human rights clinic in Northern Ireland told of the dangerous political work she does and her fear about the impact this could have on her family and her own three-year-old daughter. Yet, she explained, it is this very work which helps create a better world for her child and for other people's children. Her story was so honest, so poignant, and as did many of the conference presentations, it connected her personal struggles and fears with the larger context into which they fit.

At the end of each information-packed day, I took our group's bus back to our hotel in Beijing. The conference organizers had arranged a complicated system of shuttle buses to and from Beijing which provided sporadic and unreliable service, making me once again grateful for the infrastructure provided by my organized, albeit costly tour. Throughout the conference, I was continually frustrated by the high costs of attending and how this expense excluded so many women with much to offer and gain from the conference. I also decided that I must find a way to bring my mother to the next conference in 2005.

Money was an ever present issue in many ways, and it was ironic to realize this even in terms of conference memorabilia. Many women, myself included, wanted to buy goods from the conference, such as T-shirts, bags, and postcards, but it was difficult to locate these items. I had conflicting feelings about this; on the one hand, I wanted to bring back conference souvenirs for my family and friends, and on the other hand, I did not want to see this important event about fighting for women's rights become overly marketed. Regardless of my thoughts on the matter, there was little quality conference merchandise available. After attending several microcredit workshops, I thought this marketing niche presented a good business opportunity.

The NGO Forum left me with a renewed sense of commitment and motivation to do activist work. But more importantly,

it demonstrated to me that we cannot let formal barriers impede our work. We must work towards dismantling these formal barriers, but in the meantime, we must continue to work towards a more just world by thinking creatively, using and sharpening our skills, and working together. On the plane home, I read the China Daily and saw that Benazir Bhutto, the first woman President of Pakistan, attended the conference and made front page news describing it. When I read that Bhutto said tens of thousands of women had gathered at the conference to demand their rights, to share ideas, and to work towards making the world a better place for their daughters, I thought, "Yes, that is what we were doing, and that is what we will keep doing." As the conference amply demonstrated to me, there is no stopping us.

