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FOCUS ON BEIJING

THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN: BACKGROUND AND INSIGHTS Working for “Equality, Development, and Peace”

Dia Warren*

From August 29 until September 8, 1995, I represented the UCLA School of Law as a member of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) delegation to the Fourth World Conference Women in Beijing, People’s Republic of China. The United Nations (U.N.) Conference evaluated women’s achievements since 1985, when the last U.N. women’s conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya. Participating countries identified priorities for women for the next decade. Twelve critical areas of concern were addressed: poverty, education, health care, violence against women, effects of armed conflict, economic structures and policies, sharing of power, advancement of women, women’s human rights, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child.

A draft Platform for Action (the Platform), the nascent Conference Declaration, had been negotiated at regional conferences around the world and at preparatory meetings held in New York in early 1995. However, at the start of the Beijing conference, the Platform still contained large amounts of contested language set off in brackets. In Beijing, delegates ironed out their differences and reached a consensus on the document. The Platform aimed for commitment, accountability, and implementation

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of projects in the twelve targeted areas. It included sections on institutional and financial arrangements with target dates, suggested processes for review, and strategic objectives.

The concurrent Non-Government Organization (NGO) Forum drew 35,000 people, making this the largest women's conference ever. NGO representatives went to Beijing to lobby government delegates and to monitor working sessions on the Platform. The NGOs held daily workshops to discuss their priorities, to share their national and international work experiences, and to network with other groups. In her address to the NGO Forum, Hillary Rodham Clinton stressed the importance of these groups. As she pointed out, the NGOs will continue to play key roles following the conference. They will push their respective governments to adopt the Platform, and, following that, to effectuate its goals.

THE NGO FORUM: HUAIROU

The NGO Forum opened on August 30, 1995 and lasted through September 8, 1995. Participants were disappointed that the media did not adequately cover the issues discussed at the Forum. Instead, international press focused on the Forum's location in Huairou, thirty miles outside of Beijing. Suspected reasons for the Forum's isolation include the vast size of the NGO group, a misunderstanding of the NGOs' role by the China Organizing Committee responsible for organizing the Forum, and the reaction of China's Prime Minister Li Peng after NGOs heckled him at the U.N. Social Development Summit in Copenhagen in March 1995. The Forum's location caused many participants to undertake a two-hour round-trip commute from Beijing. The remainder found themselves staying far from Beijing and the U.N. Conference site. The Chinese developed Huairou specifically for the Forum, and stories of workshops held in tents and half-constructed buildings are all true. However, participants reveled in the conference. The Forum was festive, exhilarating, and educational. NGO representatives generally felt that, despite the commute, the weather, and other hassles, attendance at the Forum was worth their time and energy.

FORUM WORKSHOPS: AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Workshops were typically well-organized and covered the areas of concern enumerated in the Platform. The workshops I

attended included: the role and effectiveness of international legal norms in guaranteeing human rights to refugees, employment protection for women in Chinese law, intellectual property rights and biotechnology of the third world, the girl child in South Asia, and incorporating men into the family planning debate. My interests led me to a workshop that was a follow-up of a 1994 meeting that I had attended on "Women in Socio-Economic Development in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and China."¹ Many of the original participants were present. I also met the Publicity Department Chief of the All China Women's Federation, Guangdong chapter, to update my earlier research on the Federation's current priorities and programs.²

As I had previously researched the impact of economic development on women in South China and South East Asia, I chose to attend Forum workshops on the impact of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in these areas.³ I also attended workshops on fostering women-run micro-enterprises and developing alternative forms of financing for poor women engaged in home-based work. Language recognizing the negative impact of SAPs on a micro-level was weakened prior to the Beijing Conference at the insistence of the United States and the European Union.

1. The original workshop was organized by University of California at Berkeley and co-sponsored by Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. Resulting cooperative research projects with local women's centers focus on urban and rural women's rights to own and use land for income as well as shelter. Country profiles on women will be published in English and the local language.

2. My attempts to find a representative from the Guangdong Chapter of the Women's Federation provided an interesting story of women's entrepreneurship in action. After attending several Chinese workshops and inquiring of several Chinese delegates around the Forum grounds, I learned that the regional Women's Federation groups' "headquarters" were in the Huairou department store, where the officials were busy at work marketing local products!

3. SAPs are programs designed to encourage a state to develop a global- and export-oriented economy. Most SAPs have been implemented as a condition of loans from the IMF and World Bank. Although it may be too early to evaluate since they are a fairly recent phenomenon, SAPs appear to have had a disproportionately detrimental impact on women in developing countries. Women tend to be less educated than their male counterparts, and are largely confined to unskilled labor jobs. The lay-offs, the movement of available jobs to urban areas, and the high inflation rates that result from these development programs have forced many women to turn to secondary sources of income such as selling foodstuffs out of their home, or producing and marketing handicrafts. Alternative credit programs like the Grameen Bank foster such enterprise by issuing small, short-term loans with no collateral requirement. The programs have proven women are good credit risks and have a greater tendency than men to invest their income in health care and education, producing long-term benefits for the community as a whole.

LOBBYING THE GOVERNMENT CONFERENCE

The Fourth World Conference on Women convened on September 4 and continued until September 15. As the Conference overlapped with the Forum for a few days, government delegates went to Huairou to brief the NGOs and note their concerns. The United States delegation was very accessible and held an hour-long briefing each morning in Huairou. The NGOs held caucuses to discuss the Platform and to negotiate lobbying strategies.

The Planned Parenthood delegation lobbied government delegates, monitored caucuses, reported on negotiations impacting reproductive health and family planning programs, hosted workshops, sought substantive media coverage, and held nightly briefings. PPFPA's primary objective was to lobby delegates to uphold and further the consensual goals determined at the 1994 Conference on Planning and Development in Cairo. Regression loomed in Beijing: much of the language previously agreed upon in Cairo was in brackets in the Platform. For example, "the family, in its various forms," had been negotiated at length in Cairo, but the similar "family structures" and "family forms" remained contested before the Beijing conference. "Sexual Rights" terminology was also hotly contested. Debate over terminology was prevalent both in the working groups and in the corridors during the first days of the Conference. Debate on the word "gender," also settled at previous conferences, was reopened and the term was negotiated at length in the preparatory conferences.⁴

On Tuesday, September 6, the Working Group on Health agreed to support the language previously agreed upon in Cairo. Working group reports said that the Vatican agreed to remove brackets around a reference to the limited power women have over their sexual and reproductive lives. This came after Cuba, supported by Jamaica, the European Union, and others, noted that agreement had been reached in Cairo.⁵ This early an-

4. "Gender" has been applied in U.N. terminology to mean sexual roles within a cultural context — changeable with time and across cultures. "Sex," on the other hand, is biologically defined — immutable with time and across cultures.

There was similar debate on the terms "equality" and "equity." "Equity" guarantees women what is deemed fair within a particular country or culture, but not necessarily what would be equal to that accorded to men.

5. This information was taken from the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, a daily report on the Conference published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development and made available to NGO and government participants.

nouncement allowed PPFA to focus on moving forward from Cairo's benchmarks. PPFA's additional goals included ensuring adolescents access to appropriate health information, counseling and confidential services, providing treatment for and preventing sexually transmitted diseases, and improving access to health care. While governments retained reservations regarding the status of unmarried women, the completed Platform specifies that women should have the right to decide freely all matters regarding their sexuality and childbearing.

The Platform stresses that women should have access to credit; protection against all forms of violence, including rape, genital mutilation, domestic battering, and sexual harassment; and the right to inheritance (though not necessarily the same amount as men). The Platform promises improvement in the status of girls, including those unborn, and recognizes the family as the basic unit of society.⁶ The document also acknowledges that various forms of family exist.

CONCLUSION: IN RETROSPECT

At this early date, people who followed the Fourth World Conference on Women believe it was largely successful. This was the first women's conference that was not influenced or preoccupied by Cold War politics, the polemic equating Zionism with racism, and Apartheid. As a result, the Conference substantively addressed many issues facing women specifically, while building upon foundations laid at the previous U.N. conferences in Rio, Vienna, Cairo, and Copenhagen.

Direct and indirect benefits have already sprung from the Conference and NGO Forum. For example, during the Conference, the United States announced the establishment of a White House Council on Women to plan for the effective implementation of the Platform in the United States. India committed itself to raising the level of its investment in education with a focus on women and girls. Participants formed new national and international alliances. The East Asia Women's Forum preparatory conference brought together women from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Macao, and Mongolia for the first time. An organization called the Once and Future Action Network was formed by agencies working in gender, science, and technology.

6. Seth Faison, *Women of the World Disperse: To What?*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 17, 1995, at E3.

The Platform stresses commitment and provides for specific mechanisms and target dates for policy implementation. However, the battle for ratification and implementation will be an uphill one. Individual countries must establish mechanisms for financing, implementing, and monitoring the Platform goals before they can be effective. There is no binding commitment to do so, and the Platform has been criticized for its failure to include adequate and specific financial commitments.⁷

On the positive side, the Conference itself helped draw attention to women's status and concerns around the world, to mobilize governments, and to empower nongovernment groups to act on those issues.⁸ While many see the Platform as a mere guide, similar U.N. documents have been successfully used in national court cases. The Platform will help reinforce internationally recognized standards.⁹

The Preamble to the Platform for Action states: "While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious background must be borne in mind, it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms."¹⁰ Even if the document produced remains unratified by a particular country, that country's participation in negotiating and reaching a consensus is on record as recognition of the norms therein.

One stated goal of the Fourth World Conference on Women was to empower women. Those empowered by attending or following the Conference now carry the torch in the effort to promote full realization of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women.

7. Patrick E. Tyler, *Forum on Women Agrees on Goals*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 15, 1995, at A1.

8. Bella Abzug, former U.S. Congresswoman, has been quoted as saying that the Platform for Action is "a contract with the world's women." Faison, *supra* note 6.

9. For example, before now rape has not been considered torture or treated as a war crime. Its recognition as such by this document will give international and domestic lawyers a strong tool — a recognized, consensual, international standard — in the fight for just compensation of victims.

10. Tyler, *supra* note 7, at A3.