

The Women's Conference: Where Aspirations and Realities Met

By Jeanette H. Johnson and Wendy Turnbull

"Back in June, as I made my first trip as President of the [World] Bank, the first country my wife and I visited was Mali in West Africa. About an hour's drive south of the capital lies the village of Koro Koro, and while we were there, a baby was born—a girl. I have thought often of that little girl—and the life ahead of her. Her chances of going to school are no better than one in four. She will likely be stunted in her growth due to chronic malnutrition. Around the age of six, she will probably suffer genital mutilation, brutally. When she marries, probably at a very young age, she faces two decades of childbearing. And her chances of dying during childbirth are terrifyingly high—about one in 20. She will be expected to grow most of her family's food, but be the last to sit down to a meal. She will be responsible for educating and taking care of her children, but will have to walk miles a day to gather firewood and water. And if she subsequently works for a wage, she is likely to earn a third less for doing the same job as a man."

—James D. Wolfensohn, address to the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, Sept. 15, 1995

The year leading up to the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, had been filled with suspense. Would the nations of the world be able to find common ground on which they could all stand and agree to raise the education, health and economic well-being of women to levels equal to those of men?

The issues had been framed by the International Conference on Population and

Development, held in Cairo in 1994. There, the delegations representing member states of the United Nations (UN) had reached the consensus that improving the status of women was key to solving problems of population, environment and economic development.¹ Women's reproductive health and rights in particular were seen as central to the larger population and development agenda. The question became: Would the Cairo agreements become the floor on which improvements in the status of women could be built? Or had the Cairo conference usurped the women's conference, setting a ceiling with regard to women's issues that subsequent UN gatherings would never quite reach?

Preparations for the women's conference had been acrimonious and early alignments predictable: Many countries and organizations were determined to obtain agreements from the assembled governments that would go beyond previous commitments; other nations and groups were asking for a retreat from these commitments, which they argued violated many of their cultural values and religious traditions.

Preparatory meetings, held to write a Platform for Action that would settle many of the agenda items in advance and leave the conference to deal with the formalities, had adjourned in May leaving many disputes in the areas of poverty, human rights, health, and economic and political participation unresolved. Dissension centered both on issues thought to have been settled in Cairo, and on concepts new to universal documents that were being proposed for the Beijing Platform: Did the majority of nations think parental rights and responsibilities should overrule the rights of the girl child and young women? Had the world finally decided that women had "sexual rights"? When does a "conscience clause" that allows medical providers to opt out of providing health services become a denial of the rights of women to obtain lawful services?

During the spring and summer of 1995, nongovernmental organizations lobbied their governments to take positions reflecting their views. These organizations were intending to make their presence felt on an unprecedented scale at the Beijing meeting itself. Strategy sessions, educational programs and a plethora of publications detailing philosophies on disputed issues and the recommended wording for the Platform were sponsored by innumerable interest groups, including people and organizations devoted to reproductive health issues.

The draft version of the Platform for Action was indicative of the conflict: It went to Beijing not as a finished or almost finished document, but laden with hundreds of sets of brackets around words, phrases, sentences, and even whole paragraphs that one or more countries had indicated contained unacceptable language. Altogether, the brackets surrounded 40% of the 150-page document. These disputed passages would have to be negotiated and decided by the delegates in Beijing—not an auspicious prospect.

Then in Beijing...

Delegations of up to 20 people, predominantly women and often hand-picked by their governments for their political savvy and negotiating skills, arrived in Beijing from 187 nations. They did not step off the plane into a peaceful atmosphere. Their presence had been preceded by weeks of wrangling between the Chinese government and just about everybody else.

First, there had been the dispute between China and the United Nations over the location of the nongovernmental forum that was to run concurrently with the government conference. When China applied for and was selected by the United Nations as the site of the Fourth World Conference on Women, it was understood that both the governmental and nongovernmental por-

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tions of the conference would be held in Beijing. But a few months before the opening date, China announced that the nongovernmental gathering would be held in Huairou, a smaller town 40 miles (and about an hour's drive) outside of Beijing.

The distance and conditions separating the two parts of the conference made the petitioning and lobbying by nongovernmental attendees who wanted to influence government delegates more difficult. The nongovernmental gathering was moved out of Beijing, according to the Chinese, because the stadium that was originally to have been the cornerstone facility for the nongovernmental gatherings had structural problems. Skeptics countered that in a country where no group gathers without the approval and input of the government, there is no such thing as a nongovernmental organization; China did not want its own citizens getting ideas about grassroots organizing, hence it selected a site less conspicuous and accessible than Beijing. Although nongovernmental organizations urged the UN to move one or both parts of the conference out of China in protest, the relatively late notification given to the UN that the stadium would be unavailable for the conference made that option difficult.

Also contributing to the charged atmosphere surrounding the conference was an intensification of ongoing political sparring between the governments of China and the United States. A few weeks before the conference was to open, an American citizen who was a native of China had been apprehended while attempting to enter China without proper documentation; the purpose of the clandestine attempt was to gather information for a continuing campaign against China's human rights practices. Some leaders within the U.S. Congress threatened not to allow the American delegation to attend the Fourth World Conference on Women if China did not first release the American citizen it had detained. On the eve of the conference, China did so; the American delegation arrived, but often vexed China with criticism of human rights policies, family planning practices and conference facilities.

The Conference Gets Underway

Given the controversy that had surrounded many of the conference themes and the conference host, the meeting itself proved

anticlimactic in some respects. Early in the two-week event, it became clear that instead of a bruising battle or even a sullen standoff, the Fourth World Conference on Women was going to be a civil, although not entirely harmonious, affair.

By the time the government delegates arrived in Beijing, the majority had adopted the attitude that there could be no retreat from Cairo: They would not go home knowing that they had given up some of the gains in women's rights and reproductive health that had been so hard-fought just a year earlier. Having adopted this position, the delegates with a particular interest in reproductive health were somewhat surprised to learn that the Holy See, which had led a drive against much of the reproductive health language adopted in Cairo, did not intend to fight over this issue in Beijing. Its spokesperson announced just prior to the start of the conference that the Holy See saw no benefit to reopening issues that had been decided to the satisfaction of the majority of nations in Cairo and that it would not try to win reversals of that language.² Because it had given every indication in the preparatory meetings leading up to the conference that it intended to continue the struggle for wording consistent with its beliefs, this new position came as a surprise. Many delegates attributed the Holy See's decision to a desire to avert an encore of the negative press coverage it had gotten over its intransigence in Cairo.

The presence of a mostly female and less strident Holy See delegation proved to be somewhat of a curiosity, particularly for those who had witnessed the Holy See's performance in Cairo. Perhaps remembering that image, Mervat Tallawy, chair of the conference committee that negotiated the health-related language, warned the Holy See at one point not to abuse its privileges as an observer nation. She drew a polite but wounded protest from the delegate, who noted that the Holy See was trying to be cooperative. Seeming to voice her surprise over the subdued nature of the delegation, Tallawy relented, saying, "As a matter of fact, the Holy See has been very cooperative."

Proponents of freeing the health section from brackets also benefited by having Tallawy, Egypt's ambassador to Japan, as their chair. Tallawy was clearly familiar with the intricacies of the working document and determined to preside over a productive outcome.* While the Holy See exercised comparative restraint, a few of its colleagues from among Islamic nations

and South American countries did challenge the chair and the views of the majority on a number of issues.

Reproductive Health Issues

Perhaps partly because they did not spend as much time as expected rehashing commitments agreed upon in Cairo, delegates were able to move ahead in a number of other areas. Some new or expanded concepts had been introduced in the draft Platform for Action, and these became the issues that provided an element of suspense to the conference—suspense that continued into the early morning hours of the final day.

One contentious issue was what the Platform should say about parental rights and responsibilities, primarily in the context of adolescents' access to confidential health services. The draft platform that arrived in Beijing had included 23 references to parental rights, all of which were in brackets. The phrase "taking into account the rights, duties and responsibilities of parents and other persons legally responsible for children..." had been inserted, usually by the Holy See, to modify all statements about the rights of children and adolescents. For example, one paragraph on actions to be taken by governments, in cooperation with other organizations and societal institutions, had stated "Prepare and disseminate accessible information, through public health campaigns, the media, reliable counselling and the education system, designed to ensure that women and men, particularly young people, can acquire knowledge about their health, especially information on sexuality and reproduction, *taking into account the rights, duties and responsibilities of parents and other persons legally responsible for children* [italics inserted] and consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child..."³

Delegates and nongovernmental organizations espousing conservative views of the family supported these insertions, but there were strong arguments against them as well. Many delegates noted that practices harmful to the health and welfare of girls and young women often go on with the encouragement and full consent of parents. Two examples cited were female genital mutilation and early arranged marriage. Further, they contended, as young people become vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse and unsafe abortion, adolescents have the right to information and services essential to their well-being without the threat of parental veto.

After several days of deliberations, a

*One of the commitments to the advancement of women that the United Nations is being asked to make is the establishment of a position within the office of the UN secretary general to promote the advancement of women. Tallawy is considered a candidate for that position, as is Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, who was secretary general of the Fourth World Conference on Women.

compromise was reached on wording that would appear in two of the 23 paragraphs. All other references to parental rights were deleted, or the reader was referred to the compromise language, in which the final phrase in the previously cited paragraph was modified to read: "taking into account the rights of the child to access to information, privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and legal guardians to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in conformity with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."⁴

Because the Convention on the Rights of the Child* had defined child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years," delegates considered the compromise language introducing the concept of the evolving capacity of the child to be an important advance. Moreover, the new language emphasizes the rights of the child throughout, delineates the role of parents and finishes with the statement that the best interests of the child are paramount.

A number of press reports coming out of the conference took note of the fact that the platform recognizes the right of a woman to say "no" to sexual intercourse, another first for a universal document. It does this in a paragraph that was frequently referred to in the draft version as the "sexual rights" paragraph. The subject of women's sexual rights had been broached in Cairo, but strong opposition from an alliance of states of which the Holy See was the most outspoken blocked the inclusion of sexual rights language in the final document.

Nevertheless, by endorsing sexual health as central to promoting women's overall health, the Cairo conference had laid the groundwork for moving forward on recognizing a woman's right to exercise control over her sexuality. Consequently, in the final Beijing preparatory conference, a paragraph beginning "Sexual rights include the individual's right to have control over and decide freely on matters related to her or his sexuality..."⁵ had been inserted in the draft platform—and promptly bracketed.

Much early speculation centered on whether the term "sexual rights" itself, which had never appeared in an international agreement, would make it into the final platform. The arguments for and

against the sexual rights passage had been articulated well before delegates arrived in Beijing. Opponents maintained that the term "sexual rights" lacked a clear definition and was really a euphemism for lesbian rights, and thus violated the cultural and religious values of their countries. Supporters countered that sexual rights were rooted in existing human rights and were fundamental to the human rights of women to control their own lives.

Once negotiations began in earnest, it became increasingly clear that a compromise was in reach: The term "sexual rights" would have to be abandoned if the concept of women's sexual rights was to survive in the document. The approved paragraph reads: "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between

women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behavior and its consequences."⁶ More than any other material, these two sentences recognizing sexual rights as human rights emerged as the major accomplishment of the health chapter, and perhaps of the entire platform.

With regard to the issue of abortion—fought over bitterly for days in Cairo—two new paragraphs were the subject of negotiations. One, written with the objective of increasing women's access to quality health care and related information, stated that one action to be taken was to "Ensure that all health services and workers conform to human rights and to ethical, professional and gender-sensitive standards in the delivery of women's health services aimed at ensuring responsible, voluntary and informed consent." The problem was a sentence authored by the Holy See that had been appended in the draft platform stating "Nothing, however, in the present Platform for Action is intended to require any health professional or health facility to provide (or refer for) services to which they have objections on the basis of religious belief or moral conviction as a violation of conscience."⁷

Proponents of the language, which was referred to as the "conscience clause," ar-

gued that health professionals have the right to abstain from performing services or referring women for services that conflict with their own moral or religious beliefs. Other delegations argued that its inclusion was a violation of medical ethics, and a violation of the patient's right to legal health care services. Ultimately, the conscience clause was deleted and replaced with another that refers to existing codes of medical ethics that guide health professionals.

The second abortion-related paragraph also appeared in the section on increasing access to health care services and information. In draft form, it suggested that governments "Consider reviewing laws containing punitive measures against

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women who have undergone illegal abortions."⁸ Language calling on countries to reform laws that punish women who have clandestine procedures had been broached in Cairo, but abandoned following strong opposition. However, the sentence made it through intact in Beijing. A compromise was struck when delegates agreed to preface the disputed language with language on unsafe abortion agreed to in Cairo, indicating that abortion should not be promoted as a method of family planning and that governments should reduce recourse to abortion through expanded family planning services.

In some wording disputes, both sides claimed to have the support of science. Brandishing articles that have appeared in the medical literature that raise the possibility of a connection between abortion and breast cancer or that detail side effects of oral contraceptives, a number of delegations argued strongly in support of retaining in the platform a bracketed paragraph that suggested governments "Inform women about data which show that hormonal contraception, abortion and promiscuity increase risks of developing cancers and infections of the reproductive tract, so that they can make informed decisions about their health."⁹ Most delega-

*An international agreement that took effect in September 1990.

tions argued that the scientific evidence was not conclusive enough to allow such specificity into the final document, and agreed instead upon a paragraph that read: "Inform women about the factors which increase the risks of developing cancers and infections of the reproductive tract, so that they can make informed decisions about their health."

Other Platform Issues

An emotional debate raged over what the platform should say regarding the amount of resources that nations should commit to the advancement of women. Nations that tended to be the recipients of international funds—and that also had within their borders populations of women facing the starkest inequalities—sought wording that would pledge new and additional resources; the "donor" nations, almost all of them experiencing economic cutbacks within their borders, sought wording that would commit only to considering a reallocation of present commitments. The European Union and the United States, the two most prominent donors in the debate, also sought wording that would include the concept of the private sector as a way of reducing some of the pressure on governments. Days of semantic maneuvering by the two sides ended with a Platform that calls for "adequate mobilization of resources at national and international levels as well as new and additional resources to developing countries from all available funding mechanisms...."¹⁰

One small attempt to break through the poverty in which women around the world often dwell was a call for an end to unequal inheritance customs that provide more for sons than for daughters. Not possible, responded delegations from several Islamic nations, who said that Islamic law specifies that sons inherit at least twice as much as daughters because males must

support their families. The African delegations, aware that AIDS has left many children without parents, countered that because of this and other situations, daughters must have the right to inherit the same amount of family property as their brothers if their chances of surviving, educating themselves and contributing to society are to be ensured. This issue was one that resisted resolution until late in the conference, when compromise language was found to express the sense of the majority of nations while allowing dissenters some leeway. It urges governments to enact "as appropriate, and enforce [e] legislation that guarantees equal right to succession and ensures equal right to inherit, regardless of the sex of the child."

Although much is often made of a "north-south" split between nations,* it was not a major dynamic at this conference. The division of nations that it implies was most evident in the discussion over resources to be committed to women's programs. A split that was at least as evident is among Islamic nations. Some, which take a conservative stance regarding the status of women, were prominent among the nations that registered reservations to the reproductive health section of the final document to indicate that they were not part of the consensus on these issues.[†] Veiled women delegates from these countries rose in committee sessions to speak in opposition to much of the bracketed language, suggesting, for example, as did a delegate from Yemen, that wording referring to the sexual and reproductive rights of adolescents simply be deleted because "young girls don't have sexual and reproductive health concerns."

In contrast, other Islamic nations stressed that nothing in the Islamic religion prevents the full and equal participation of women in society; the problem, they said, is the way in which Islam is sometimes interpreted. Among the most prominent spokespersons for this point of view was Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan who addressed the opening plenary session.

"Today, the Islamic world has elected three women prime ministers," she noted.[‡] "We were elected by men and women. Our election has shown that it is socially acceptable for a woman to work and be a mother."¹¹

Nonetheless, she acknowledged that these same nations are among 15 Asian countries in which men increasingly outnumber women because female fetuses are often aborted and girl babies abandoned at birth. This happens, she said, "not because of religion but because of social prejudice. The rights that Islam gave

women are being denied them."

Bhutto also made the connection between equal access to resources and the rights of women: "A woman cannot make her own choices unless she has financial independence, and a woman cannot have financial independence if she cannot work. If the girl child is to be valued, if the wife is to say no to domestic violence, she must have financial independence."

Some of the conference's highest drama surrounded the adoption of a declaration that would serve as a preamble to the Platform for Action. The platform is 362 paragraphs of convoluted, multiclaused, committee-written sentences that are a grammarian's worst nightmare. ("Where but in a UN document can you find one sentence that goes on for 20 lines?" asked one attendee.) Thus, some thought it would be a welcome contrast if the declaration could rise above the technicalities and give voice to women's aspirations. As one delegate stated early in the conference, "I'd like the declaration to 'sing'"—an ambitious goal for any document on which 187 political entities must reach a consensus.

Periodically, harried members of the working group drafting the declaration from a version submitted by the Group of 77[§] would appear at meetings of the committee at which they were to present their work for approval, saying they were not yet ready and begging for postponements. Word circulated that much ground was being ceded to conservative voices trying to insert wording in the declaration that would undermine the Platform for Action. Alarmed by that thought, members of several nongovernmental organizations set to work drafting an alternative declaration that they hoped one of their governments would introduce for consideration, or that they would simply release as their own unofficial conference statement.

Another set of voices suggested that since the declaration was proving so troublesome, it should be dropped altogether. The Chinese, who wanted something that could be referred to in later years as the Beijing Declaration, let it be known that the latter suggestion was not acceptable. A declaration was eventually adopted, after the conference officers sent a delegation to the meetings to quell bickering within the subcommittee and rumors without.

The finalized Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration had been scheduled to be adopted in a plenary session on the last morning of the conference, with closing ceremonies in the afternoon. Agreement on final wording did not come until 5 AM on the last morning, however,

*"North-south" is a designation for developed and developing countries that refers to the geographical location of most developed countries in the northern hemisphere and most developing nations in the southern hemisphere.

†Rather than refusing to join the consensus that adopts an entire document, nations can "reserve" or withhold their endorsement of particular sections or paragraphs. While all 187 nations endorsed the Platform for Action, some 20 nations registered reservations on the paragraph calling for a review of punitive laws on illegal abortion and on the sexual rights paragraph. The Holy See withheld its endorsement of the entire health chapter of the Platform.

‡In addition to Bhutto, the other two prime ministers are Begum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh and Tansu Ciller of Turkey.

§The Group of 77 is an alliance of developing nations that formed in response to the Group of Seven, an alliance of industrialized nations.

and the documents needed to be produced in the six official conference languages so the governments could see what they were adopting. Therefore, the program for the final day was switched: Closing ceremonies were held in the morning while translators and the UN Secretariat worked feverishly to produce the needed documents. Those were approved in a plenary session that convened in the late afternoon and adjourned around midnight.

Will Anything Change?

Reminding the conference of the importance of its work in determining wording within bracketed sections, Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, who was secretary general of the conference, stated, "The bracketed sections are the ones that can make a difference. No one brackets sections that will make no difference."

But will a Platform for Action that is determined by consensus of the participants make a difference? Will anything happen as a result of a document that has no method of enforcement?

Mongella herself underscored both the great potential of UN conferences and most people's more limited expectations of them when she stated, "If the world were to implement even one chapter of the document, we would see a big change in women's lives."

As its name indicates, this conference was the fourth in a series called by the United Nations to raise the visibility of women's issues and help people recognize the problems that exist.* In this manner, UN government conferences and their parallel nongovernmental forums are believed to contribute to changes in world public opinion that then advance policy.

These conferences have surely been part of the reason that the empowerment of women is now being spoken of as critical to solving some of the world's major problems related to population, environment and sustainable development. And because people had become concerned that nations might be engaging in mostly talk and little action—sometimes even passing laws that they could point to as accomplishments even though the laws were not being en-

forced—this women's conference asked the head of state or the chief delegate to list country-specific actions that their nation would take to empower women within their borders. In the 15-minute statements that each nation was allotted as part of the plenary sessions, about half of the countries complied with the request and listed actions that they pledged to take to improve the status of women. Other nations later said that they, too, had or were working on such a list.

In addition to the official government delegations representing the 187 member states of the United Nations, some 3,000 nongovernmental organizations sent one or more accredited representatives to observe the government conference, a 10-fold increase over the approximately 300 that registered for the 1985 Nairobi conference.[†] The nongovernmental representatives banded into groups based on common concerns and formed some 40 caucuses[‡] that met daily to plan strategy and lobby delegates for favored wording in the Platform for Action. Such grassroots activism, in which citizens of the various countries gather information about programs in the rest of the world and go back home to monitor their own governments, is another way that nonbinding resolutions from UN conferences can achieve results. As soon as it became known, for example, that the country-specific commitments that each nation had pledged to take were not going to be recorded in any official conference document, nongovernmental representatives set about winnowing them from speeches, compiling them, seeking means of distribution and urging representatives to hold their governments accountable.

Attendance at the conference by the president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, may be an indication that attending to women's needs is being taken seriously on the economic front. Wolfensohn, who had been in his position for only three months at the time of the conference, noted, "I have made only three appointments at the vice presidential level...so far. All three have been based on the sole criterion of professional excellence. All three have been women."¹²

Nonetheless, Wolfensohn was not always treated kindly during a question and answer session at a meeting of nongovernmental representatives. Many women wore white, the color of mourning in China, for Wolfensohn's appearance and had plenty to say about forced restructuring of economies that victimized most a country's poorest citizens, primarily women and children.

Will there be a Fifth World Conference

on Women? It is not known yet whether the UN will convene additional conferences on the topic. But it is interesting to note that some of the strongest advocates of continuing the series of conferences are women from developing countries. While early conferences might have been initiated and led primarily by the developed countries, delegations from developed countries tended to accompany the Holy See to the back-row seats in Beijing, where they listened while their "southern" sisters took to the microphones. Their vocalizations, and the promise of more to come, may have finally silenced the charge that women's rights are a concept being thrust on the rest of the world by radical Western women.

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*The first was held in Mexico City in 1975, the second in Copenhagen in 1980 and the third in Nairobi in 1985.

†This figure does not take into account the more than 20,000 women and men who came—often simply as interested individuals—to attend the nongovernmental forum in Huairou.

‡Caucuses were devoted to such areas as reproductive health, indigenous peoples, refugee women, peace, disabled women, human rights, youths and lesbians, among others.