

# Back from the NGO Forum on Women

by *Cynthia Lam*

*Une participante au Forum des ONG relate ses impressions de la Conférence.*

"Oh, you are so lucky!" This was the unanimous acclamation each time I mentioned my participation in the Beijing 1995 Conference. Yes, I was fortunate to have had this opportunity—being of Chinese origin, to visit mainland China, meet sisters from all over the world at the NGO Forum. I was one of 40 Canadian women participants sponsored by the government, and more precisely one of eight from Quebec. I was thrilled.

Having heard much about the controversies surrounding the organization of the Forum, I was curious about the general preparation and sentiments in China towards hosting the largest international women's event. I decided therefore to start my trip to China early and took advantage of any opportunity to chat with heads of national organizations, relatives and friends, taxi drivers, and small vendors alike. Motivated by different reasons and at varying degrees, all Beijing residents were involved and affected by the country's preparations for the Conference. The city

had to put on a new look. All service sectors had been engaged in some kind of "upgrading." Normal traffic volume had been greatly reduced to assure efficient transportation for

and cultural barriers also created some grave misunderstandings. Most participants nevertheless came away from the NGO Forum and Conference inspired and exuberant from the resilience shown by

women around the world against injustice. Ideological differences led not only to heated debates but also heightened the need for sensitization and mutual understanding. What transpired as imperative objectives are the networking and the solidarity among different groups, nations, continents, races, and generations, and indeed between men and women. The issues facing us know no boundaries. They demand global partnership in order for changes to occur.

From all around the world, we heard testimonies of the devastating effects of economic globalization which destroys communi-

ties and further impoverishes women and children. We heard about the rising strength of conservatism and fundamentalism, their socio-political and religious ramifications. We heard about how the power and greed of multinational corporations and financial institutions have made their projects a disaster for the ecosystem and the direct impact on the health of local communities. We also heard about how violence against women takes on new dimensions during war-



*Chinese students, Beijing 1995.*

*Photo: Milana Todoroff*

Forum participants. Numerous conventions and tour bookings had been cancelled to free up hotels and tourist attractions. Tens of thousands of volunteers were on site to lend a hand, as were security guards who carried out the unpleasant and sometimes confrontational duties.

Apprehension and tension were obvious at the outset, largely due to relentless media propaganda as well as prejudices and bias from peoples of different origins. The serious language

time when women are raped and massacred, and how the struggle against colonialism is linked with anti-nuclear testing.

Almost in the same breath, we heard women from all parts of the world proudly share their strategies and success in promoting women's rights. Here are some examples from the Asia-Pacific region. A Chinese woman asserted that she had no desire to have more than one child notwithstanding China's one-child policy; economic autonomy is her priority now. A Burmese woman spoke of her courageous project to stop women-trafficking, and what brought about the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (Nobel Peace Prize laureate) in Burma. A Filipino project described how they rose to fight with partners in the Asia-Pacific region against foreign aid which do only harm to their Indigenous peoples. The push by Korean women for redress for "Comfort

Women" gathered wide support. A group of Indian women lawyers relentlessly carried on socio-legal battles for the protection of Indian girls. Social workers from Hong Kong are confronting the problems of distraught wives abandoned by their affluent businessmen-husbands. Taiwan women are taking a more active role in determining their political future.

In my presentation at the workshop "Social work symposium on violence against women," I submitted the argument that achieving equality for women of colour is inseparable from their minority community as a whole achieving equal social status in mainstream society. Only an anti-racist society can assure equal opportunity for development for all its members, men and women alike. Violence will have no place in a society which treats its members with respect and dignity.

The NGO Forum and the UN Conference on Women are models of democratic negotiation and the lobbying process. The real challenge for NGOs will be how to hold their governments accountable for the commitments made at the Conference.

Yes, I was fortunate to have participated in this "global" town hall meeting, to "look at the world through women's eyes." I cannot help but sing the theme song of the "Bread and Roses Women's March Against Poverty" which took place in Quebec last June: "Du pain et des roses, pour changer des choses...." As Mao Tze-tung once said, "Women hold up half the sky." But then come to think of it, what good is it if only half the sky is being held?

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