

## The Beijing Conference - Peggy Fitzpatrick Rigaud, Missouri

My name is Peggy Fitzpatrick Rigaud. I'm from Missouri, but have lived most of my life in Montpellier, France. I belong to the American Women's Group here, which is a member of FAWCO (The Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas).

From 1993 – 1995 I was first vice-president of FAWCO, and a member of its delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. FAWCO had only recently awakened to the realization that what we had long been doing throughout the world in individual clubs, as well as united under the auspices of the Federation, was in keeping with United Nations aspirations for women and children, the environment, education, eradication of violence, and equal work opportunities. We decided to make the effort to be recognized by various arms of the United Nations, and notably by the Economic and Social Council.

Obtaining NGO recognition required the submission of reams of paperwork, and took us some time, but the outcome was good: we were officially admitted to ECOSOC on August 14, 1997. And yes, that *is* after the end of the Beijing Conference. But we were invited to attend it before our membership in ECOSOC was definitive, based on what they had learned about us from our various applications. We were issued five official passes to attend the plenary sessions, and the universe that existed behind the official scene was all right there in the open for our instruction, our pleasure, our awe.

There were workshops on every subject, and the seven of us spread ourselves out to cover as many as we could (and yet we barely scratched the surface.) When we happened to overlap, we went together. An example was one that was run by three impressive African Muslim women. A large part of their message was that FGM is NOT sanctioned by the Koran.

The NGO Forum in Huairou was a world unto itself! It was a university, or perhaps several of them. It was a training ground; it was a fair; it was, certainly, a three-ring circus! It was not the site of protests or demonstrations, or at any rate I saw only one, of Iranian woman, and it was peaceful.

Everyone there seemed to be animated by a firm belief that they themselves were making a difference in the world, at least their part of it, and that they would succeed in communicating their message to everyone present in Beijing and would soon see their cause triumph with the help of the United Nations.

So, it was a totally upbeat atmosphere.

The most visible and impressive groups were the Africans. They claimed possession of the sides of streets in the area of the Forum and set up shops where they hunkered down in their gloriously colored and patterned boubous, most of them with bare feet, to sell handcrafts, trinkets...anything that might interest conference attendees....and allow them to make enough money to repay their round-trip airfare and eat and sleep while they were there. But they hadn't come to sell trinkets; they didn't hide their real concerns: literacy, women's and children's health, nutrition, women as entrepreneurs, as we learned in their workshops

At FAWCO'S biennial conference in Nairobi Kenya in March of 1995, FAWCO had defined its "platform" of interests. They were the same things that preoccupy us today:

- Education
- Eradication of violence against women and children
- Environment

- Equal opportunities in the world of work

We prepared an introductory brochure for the FORUM to present our organization and its interests, but FAWCO did not present a workshop. Our reasoning was that we were new to the United Nations fold; we would adopt a fact-finding stance .... And be well prepared to present workshops at the *next* World Conference on Women....

How could we implement what we learned in Beijing at home to our clubs? I was proudest of the movement in my own club for literacy training among immigrant women. It was useful, it was difficult, it was fun. And it eventually (after years) died away due to a change in demographics among our members. This is still a great need in France and no doubt in the United States as well, where there are many immigrants. I hope that we will get back to it.

The Chinese are used to humanity on a large scale, and they did everything they could do to contain us. Each hotel had a guard 24 hours a day on every floor to observe comings and goings in the rooms and verify that they were on the up and up. The desk clerk at our hotel showed us a stack of blankets they had been told to keep at reception .... to throw over the bodies of any women who tried to go out into the streets naked. I don't think any of the blankets were used, but you do have to hand it to the Chinese for thinking of every possibility....

When we lament the fact that a women's conference of this scale has never been attempted again, we have to think about why this is so. Having seen the organization of the Olympics in France, which was a much smaller affair...I can see why any country would hesitate to take on another Women's Conference.

I have a feeling that another World Conference on Women like this one would not be so blithely organized today. Peaceful demonstrations are going out of style; weapons are coming in. Negotiating is replaced by shouting matches at best and occasionally something stronger. Variety in outlook is no longer seen as the spice of life.

The Fourth World Conference on Women marked the end of an age of innocence in some ways, when there was more optimism and belief in cooperation.

What needs to be done to insure the possibility of an eventual Fifth World Conference?