

## Nine Days in Huairou, the NGO Forum, 1995 - Suzanne Hanchett, Oregon

In 1995 I was living in Portland, Oregon. I had moved there from New York three years earlier and was busy with my new career in international development. Mostly I was working in Bangladesh as a consultant to UNICEF, World Health Organization, CARE, and many other organizations. Somehow, I connected with a group of Portland women who were planning to go to the NGO Forum in Huairou, China as part of the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, and we all did go for the nine-day meetings in Huairou.

One of my New York friends and my business partner in our consulting firm, Eva Friedlander, was working with the UN at the time, and she recruited me to help take some notes on plenary speeches while I was there. These 70+ talks and some other materials were published in her edited book, *Look at the World Through Women's Eyes*, which is available for free at Internet Archives and has been translated into French and Spanish. After the meetings I wrote an article for the UNFPA magazine, *Populi* (December 1995). I posted 95 photos from the Huairou meetings on Flickr.



Very important to me, my young daughter, age 27 at the time, joined me in Huairou. She had just finished her graduate studies in math at Cal Tech, and she was interested in following the science and technology



theme. We did a little touring while we were there. I felt much in common with a young African woman I saw at the Opening Ceremony with her baby on her shoulder! We were living the conference theme of “intergenerational communication.”

For me, this experience was really important. There were 30,000 women (and a few men) there. Seeing and listening to many people from many different countries and walks of life was a life-changing experience, even though as an anthropologist I was accustomed to contact with people of other cultures. I already had some sense of the importance of the UN from a 1994 assignment in the West Bank and Gaza on women's issues in the Palestinian health system (alas, at an optimistic time when the “two-state solution” seemed to be a real possibility). A representative of a small, not especially powerful women's NGO had told me that her group took courage from the knowledge that the UN had people who cared about women's issues. While in Huairou, I was interested to see a few participants who were clearly new to the world of international anything – indeed, I suspected, they had hardly ever ventured outside of their villages or regions. One Rajput woman's image stays with me: she represented a union of women who did piecework. Since then, I have been a regular attendee at the annual CSW meetings at the UN in New York every March, when my organization the International Women's Anthropology Conference (IWAC, for which I was co-president) usually hosts a panel discussion. These meetings always bring back the same sense of awe that I had in Beijing/Huairou.

It was very clear that being listened-to was a strong incentive for participants to attend. Global and local disputes and campaigns were loudly expressed. Philippine political prisoners (Gabriela), Korean comfort women abused by the Japanese during WWII, Thursdays in Black striving for a “world without rape.” I was especially moved by a “protest” demonstration by Dalit women, members of the lowest Indian caste. Having lived for two years in India, I was quite aware of their extreme social disadvantages and struggles. Seeing them standing with their signs on a Huairou staircase was moving. Among the other messages on their signs was this one: “Every day 48 Dalits are assaulted, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, two Dalits are burnt.”



Dalit demonstration in Huairou

I was startled to learn that domestic violence and other forms of violence against women were concerns to people of all class backgrounds. Another frequently mentioned theme was economic injustice. I wrote about this in my *Populi* article. Structural adjustment programs and other neoliberal reforms had taken a great toll on working people during the preceding 15 years. Some Huairou participants were angry that the Beijing Platform for Action did not challenge the negative human impacts of structural adjustment programs.

I remember the Africa Tent, where absolutely every statement was spoken in both French and English. Another vivid image is of a quilting exhibit: quilts displayed on a long wall. Sweet Honey and the Rock, one of my all-time favorite music groups, performed to enthusiastic audiences.



After returning to Portland, our group did much to bring the messages back to the communities where we lived. We spoke at community colleges and public events about the importance of the Beijing and Huairou meetings. I set up an exhibit at a local shopping mall on “The Girl Child,” engaging a group of high school students in building display panels and displaying photos. This was fun for us all and empowering to the girls to actually build the public exhibit.

The Fourth World Conference on Women and other events supporting women’s rights form a beacon to many women in this world, women in situations where their rights are not at all respected. In many parts of the U.S. our rights are declining now, and improvements seem unlikely to happen any time soon. The UN is far from perfect, of course, but the rights framework on which it is based has much value and moral power to at least give us a sense of hope.