



## **Beijing Conference - Judy Lear, Minnesota**

My name is Judy Lear, and I am from Minnesota. I attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the NGO Forum in Huairou, representing the NGO International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW) as their Status of Women Chair. In that capacity and prior to going to China, I visited 10 South American countries and our affiliates to hear what the most important issue for them was — violence against women. I went to the Prep Com in Europe and learned that economic equality was their issue. The African nations felt the girl child was most important. My special focus was, and still is, older women.

### **A Special Memory**

It was in Huairou, Wednesday, September 6, 1995, the day Hillary Clinton was to talk to the thousands of NGO representatives at an open outdoor forum that would accommodate everyone. Unfortunately, it was pouring rain, and the venue was changed to an inside auditorium at the Conference Center that could only seat a fraction of the attendees. Picture a gray, rectangular building with at least ten stairs leading up to the doors to enter. Chinese guards were linked arm in arm across the front of the building at the top of the steps, not allowing anyone entrance. Picture at least a thousand people with umbrellas, all colors and patterns, standing so close together that the umbrellas made a canopy, sheltering all from rain.

I joined the crowd that was so compact I could not even raise my umbrella. As I stood under this amazing, shared canopy, I listened to a beautiful black woman from Africa in a colorful turban matching her long dress talking to a young, red-headed freckled faced woman from Ireland about female genital mutilation. Then I turned and listened to a Korean woman talking to an Indian woman in a flowing silk sari about “comfort women.” At one point a woman started yelling, “Push! Push!” But there was nowhere to go.

This was before large screen technology and there were not even loudspeakers to the outside of the building in the drenching rain. So, the thousands of us on the square did not hear those now famous words of Hillary Clinton, “Women’s rights are human rights!” We only could hear each other.

Then a song, “We Shall Overcome,” came floating through the beating raindrops. Picture being under the colorful canopy of umbrellas standing with equally colorful women dressed in clothes that depicted their countries — saris of flowing silk; bright patterns of Africa with matching turbans; blue jeans from Western countries. Picture the colors of our skins in all different hues. Picture us together sharing umbrellas, sharing problems and cooperating for solutions.

### **Standing Up for Older Women**

I became part of the Older Women’s Caucus, which worked very hard to include verbiage in the Platform for Action in a positive manner for older women. We generated the phrase “women of all ages.” Elizabeth Sclater (UK) acted as Chair, and I became the Co-chair. The diligent work of Virginia Hazzard

(USA), Suzanne Paul (USA) and Betty Mullen (USA-AARP) created our positions. Others involved were Betty Johnson (USA) and Irene Hoskins (USA). When the CSW convened in Beijing, we continued holding Caucus meetings; advocating for older women; and writing pieces to put in the Beijing Platform for Action. Highlights were visits from Bella Abzug and Betty Friedan. Did we accomplish anything for older women? Unfortunately, the question still hangs in the air.

## **In Conclusion - A Lifetime Commitment**

The Beijing Conference on Women changed my life! I attended the CSW every March for the next five years and finally moved to New York to be part of an NGO at the UN. ICJW's delegation was full, and Helen Hamlin suggested that Gray Panthers may have a space for me. I became a member of the delegation with Joan Davis. I went on to be the convener of the NYC Gray Panthers Network, member of the National Gray Panthers' Board, and ultimately the National President. My positions at the UN continued with membership on the NGO CSW, NGO Committee on Ageing, now and becoming co-chair with Patty Day of the Sub-Committee on Older Women. With Ferdous Ara Begum (UN CEDAW Committee) we created and passed General Recommendation #27 of CEDAW on the Human Rights of Older Women.

I moved back to Minnesota in 2013 because my mother had double by-pass surgery, and it was time for me to act on my words in a personal way.

I was 52 years old in 1995 and now at this writing I am an "older woman" myself at 82 years old. I have continued to be an advocate for older women. The issues have evolved but some seem to be the same — invisibility, economic security, violence, and on and on. I have hope that things will continue to change for the betterment of "women of all ages."



Judy Lear drafting language with Virginia Hazzard and Lenie Malden-Rotterdam at the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995.