Beijing Conference – Elahe Amani, California

My name is Elahe Amani, a women's human rights activist with a background in technology, women's studies, mediation, and conflict resolution. I came to the United States from Iran in 1974 to attend UCLA after graduating from Tehran University. I returned to Iran in 1979, but the post-revolution environment became unsafe, and I eventually returned to the U.S. in 1984.

I had planned to attend the Nairobi World Conference on Women in 1985, but a family health crisis prevented me from going. I followed the global women's movement closely and promised myself I would not miss the next one. That promise kept me inspired for ten years—until the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

At the time, I was teaching in the Women's Studies Program at California State University, Long Beach, and serving as Co-Chair of the Coalition of Women from Asia and the Middle East (CWAME). When I learned that the Women of Color Resource Center in the Bay Area was forming a delegation, I joined them with my personal resources. The long flight to Shanghai, with the around 70 people including some girls filled with excitement and shared purpose, remains one of my most memorable journeys.

After a few days in Shanghai, we traveled to Xi'an and then to Beijing. I had submitted a proposal to conduct a workshop titled "Women's Human Rights and Islam," which was accepted. Over a hundred participants, many from Muslim-majority societies, attended the session. For me, that workshop embodied the spirit of Beijing: women from diverse cultures, faiths, and nations claiming space, raising their voices, and standing in solidarity.

During the conference, I met around thirty Iranian women activists and feminists from the diaspora. Despite our diverse backgrounds, we shared a commitment to advancing women's rights in and outside Iran in diaspora. In contrast, the Islamic Republic of Iran had sent few hundred government-aligned representatives of GONGO (Government Non-Governmental Organization) promoting a propagandistic image of women's progress. The contrast between their narrative and our lived experiences was striking. Many of us have stayed in close contact, collaborating across borders for decades.

One of the most moving experiences was attending an all-day Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights, organized by Charlotte Bunch, Founding Director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University. Women from around the world shared testimonies of human rights violations. It was at the conference that I first learned about the "comfort women"—elderly survivors of wartime sexual slavery—who had come to Beijing seeking justice. Their courage and resilience deepened my understanding of gender-based violence and the universal demand for justice.

Another vivid memory is standing in the rain with thousands of women when Hillary Clinton declared, "Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights." The crowd erupted in tears, laughter, and applause—a defining affirmation of the global struggle for equality. I attended the actual UN conference a few times and the discussion on " Gender Equality " vs. " Gender Equity" in the language of the official document was quite interesting.

I met Marilyn Fowler, President of the Women's Intercultural Network (WIN), founded a year earlier after? this trip. After returning from Beijing, I joined WIN, working to "bring Beijing home" by organizing community programs including but not limited to sharing the conference's lessons on empowerment of women and how it contributes to family and community empowerment to new immigrants in Southern California . Over time, I became a Board Member and eventually currently President of WIN. During the last three decades, WIN established Global Circles with women in Japan, Uganda,

Afghanistan, and the Iranian diaspora. Since 2020, I have led efforts to connect women across generations and geographies around shared goals of equity and equality, justice, and peace.

My engagement did not stop with Beijing. I attended the first post-Beijing conference in Havana, Cuba, in 1998, as part of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) delegation, conducting workshops on women, peace, and gender-based violence in the U.S. Since then, I have participated annually in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York—organizing, moderating, and presenting at parallel events that keep the Beijing Platform for Action alive.

For the Beijing+30 commemoration at CSW 2025, WIN organized two panels: one featuring members of WIN who attended the original Beijing Conference, and another by the Iranian Circle of WIN, with three women from the diaspora also in Beijing in 1995. I was honored to participate in both panels, reflecting on progress and ongoing challenges in the twelve areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Today, what I am deeply passionate about the intersection of gender, race, the ever-increasing economic gap between global north and global south and within each country, and the global rollback of women's human rights, fueled by religious extremism and populist movements, which threatens decades of progress.

The Beijing Conference remains a high point in my memory—a moment when collective vision and solidarity transcended borders. Yet, three decades later, the promise of the Twelve Critical Areas of Concern, compiled from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, remains unfulfilled. Achieving equality demands renewed commitment, courage, and imagination. To make change happen, we must mentor young women, support immigrant and refugee communities, advocate for equal pay and reproductive justice, and build alliances across race, age, gender identity, and culture. Networks like WIN and participation in CSW parallel events are powerful ways to be part of this global movement.

Beijing was not the end of a journey—it was the beginning of a lifelong mission. Its legacy shaped the students in my classes, where the Beijing Platform for Action became a cornerstone of Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective and Global Women's Movements courses. Its lessons guide my work every day, reminding me that when women unite—across cultures, faiths, and borders—change is not merely possible; it is inevitable. This conviction drives me to keep building, writing, teaching, and fighting for a world where women's voices are heard, their rights protected, and their agency fully realized.