

**Reflections on Experiences at the Fourth United Nations'
Conference on Women – Beijing 1995 , and at the Beijing+5
Special Session**

For Beijing +10

**Julia Panourgia Clones,
Economist. Environment & Gender Consultant,
President, World Women in Development & Environment (WorldWIDE)**

Beijing 1995 – Fourth UN Conference on Women

Looking back at the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing, and particularly at the concurrent NGO Forum in Huarou, it seems and feels like a dream; a dream that did not come true all together. I can still see, with my eyes closed, that wave of humanity that reached Beijing in 1995 and spread over Huarou; I see women of all colors and ages and from different walks of life moving around in purposeful and vibrant steps full of expectations.

With their surprisingly high numbers and strong voices they seemed to tell the world that “they are here to be counted, to be heard, to be reckoned with”. They were asking for recognition, justice and equal sharing in the world they live in; and, the world appeared to be getting ready to listen.

As the President of “World Women in Development and Environment” (WorldWIDE), a global NGO, together with Gretchen Bloom, a member of the Board of that NGO, organized and carried out an extensive program of activities at the '95 NGO Forum, including four seminars and workshops on:

- “Strengthening Efforts to Fully Integrate Grassroots Women in Sustainable Development;
- “Greening the Private Sector: Partnership with Women Towards Sustainable Development”;
- “Strengthening Women’s Participation in Energy, Environment, and Development: An Integrated Framework”;
- The Key Role of Women in Changing Lifestyles & Consumption Patterns.

These events were very well attended. What was most impressive, however, was the high level of motivation and leadership skills of the participants. They represented a variety of cultures and socio-economic circumstances, but had similar objectives; they demanded

equity in representation, ownership, and voice. They also had remarkably sophisticated views on economic development, environmental stewardship, and good governance.

I also got immersed in the other activities of the Forum, which resembled more a graduate university program in, among others, economics, sociology, law and jurisprudence, ethics, and international affairs, rather than a huge gathering of some 30,000 mostly non-professional women.

This was the first women's conference when faxes and the Internet were able to play a major role in mobilizing participants for a major conference. Technology was finally working for women!

Gaining access for an NGO to the Conference was not easy and required vigilance and persistence, even for a representative of an ECOSOC accredited NGO, like myself.

It was fascinating, however, to see the role being played by the NGOs in helping to craft the final Beijing Platform. Government representatives quickly realized that they were not experts and needed the assistance of the specialist at the various NGOs. That was an empowering realization!

What was even more striking was a sense of commitment and of an uplifting forward looking outlook, as well as an effective net-working atmosphere. People were eager to learn from each other on practical matters and real life situations, and ready to make alliances and cooperation agreements.

In the aftermath of Beijing 1995, I got involved in a two-year project on "Natural Resource Management by Women in Uganda" which was funded by The European Union. This two-year pilot project, with over a quarter million dollars budget, was initiated in Huarou with the cooperation of the Presidents of two NGOs present, one European which obtained the funding, and one Ugandan which implemented the project. In addition, I participate at the Women's Forum in Beijing led to my working on development projects focusing on environment and gender in Egypt, Yemen, Slovakia, and Brazil. These projects were funded by various Multilateral and Bilateral Agencies, including USAID, UNDP, UNFPA, World Bank, and the Finish Foreign Ministry.

Gretchen Bloom, also provided support to various participants from countries where there was an office of the USAID, as a Senior Gender Adviser for the Asia and Near East Bureau of USAID. She also had an interesting personal experience in that she had the unique opportunity to be able to bring her mother (age 78) and her French foreign daughter (age 21) to the event. Three generations, sharing the same experiences! Her two companions came to the four sessions World WIDE was running and helped document and photograph the events. For her Mom, this was the first time she had been away from her Dad for more than a weekend; and he "gave her permission" to leave him! As for her French daughter, she had never been beyond Europe and adjusted brilliantly to her bicycle, her Chinese noodles and the language, learning a few words even the very first day.

For a few years following Beijing 1995 I expect we all felt the benefit from participating at the '95 NGO Forum and that our contribution towards gender equity and justice was significant. We saw progress made in mainstreaming gender issues in development projects and in substantive academic debates on gender equity and justice.

Beijing + 5 Special Session – UN Headquarters

Five short years after Beijing, being at the UN Headquarters in New York for the Beijing + 5 Special Session it felt very different; the atmosphere and outlook had changed and expectations had started to be lowered. It is true that 'lots of noises' were heard but the enthusiasm was lacking; the vibrant presence of so many women was not there.

Official access to the workings of the United Nations became even more difficult, in spite the appearance of "more/better" formal arrangements for women's representation.

The participation of women from different countries, different cultures, and varying socio-economic circumstances was limited. Those present, however, developed a more sophisticated approach for networking and lobbying the official delegates and thus influencing their input to the Special Session.

In conclusion, Beijing + 5 became a kind of laboratory for Women's NGOs to sharpen their techniques for advocacy and collaborations, as well as decision influencing at the UN, in contrast to Beijing 1995 where the outlook was brainstorming historic social and economic evolution, in addition to enhancing advocacy and networking techniques.