

Thoughts on Beijing



By Charlotte Johnson

It was in March that I applied to the Canadian Beijing Facilitating Committee to be one of the funded delegates to the Non Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum of the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women. As a member of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (an NGO), I was informed that I was one of forty Canadian women selected; I was filled with a sense of excitement. It wasn't long before the information started arriving: the Draft Platform for Action; what to eat and what not to eat when in China; what immunizations to get; what emergency medicines to take, etc. All this was important, but it was also enough to get one a little anxious about what to expect.

On August 29, I arrived in Beijing, China. And I stepped into a global community at the NGO Forum in Huairou, on the outskirts of Beijing. The focus of the Forum was "to bring together women and men to challenge, create and transform global structures and processes at all levels through empowerment and celebration in women."

One section of the small town of Huairou was designated the UN Conference site. The school, three hotels, the convention centre, and two or three other buildings contained workshops and display areas. There were also tent areas. There was space to accommodate people from all nations in the Regional Tent Area. It was a global community in the true sense. It was a community without feelings of worldly conflicts. It was a community where everyone had the same focus - to participate in a conference where the rights of women and girls around the world were paramount on the agenda and to encourage governments to commit to the Platform for Action.

When I registered, I was given two program books: one was a catalogue of the thousands of workshops offered; the other outlined the plenary sessions and the cultural events. Each evening it was a task to sift through the workshop lists and select for the next day. My patience was tried at these workshops. First, it was difficult to find the workshop locations. And then participants often encountered full rooms and workshop

facilitators who did not show up.

The first morning I went to the opening plenary to hear Daw San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize Winner from Burma who had just been released from house arrest after five years. Because she felt she was needed in her own country, her message came via a videotaped address. She encouraged women to speak out and she spoke of empowerment.

I attended an Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) Workshop at the NGO Forum, entitled "The Potential and Strategic Importance of the Girl Child," held in collaboration with other organizations. ACWW's statement to the preparatory meeting for the UN Conference pinpointed the twin issues of:

- the value of women's unpaid work and their contribution to the wealth of society; and,
- the potential and strategic importance of the girl child.

At Beijing and beyond, by incorporating this perspective into its "women in development" concerns, ACWW's aim is to become a strong advocate of the girl child. ACWW's input into the Platform for Action was underpinned by a staunch belief that practical steps taken by governments will ensure a real and measurable advance in the situation of women and the girl child worldwide. [This paragraph was extracted from *The Country-woman*, October-December, 1995.]

I attended a number of other workshops, including one on leadership, women and the media and strategies to get women into political positions.

I was impressed by the quality of women that were at the Conference. Women who were able to express themselves exceptionally well. Women who said that the education and empowerment of women will result in a more caring, tolerant and peaceful life for all. Women who said that there must be equal access to employment opportunities and



Charlotte Johnson (right), President of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, is pictured at the Canadian Embassy in Beijing with Frances Laracy (left), a WI member from Newfoundland.

health services and to a place in the decision-making forums. Women who realize that the dignity of all people must be recognized and valued. Women who know that everyone must be assured of the basic rights of humankind - love, nurturing and an environment free of violence and fear.

In the end, the governments participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women, who are determined to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for women everywhere, cannot do it alone. They cannot do it without the commitment of people like ourselves, in communities like ours, with the resources we have and with the leadership among us determined to right any inequalities that may exist.

And so, it is with humility and thanks that I had the privilege to attend the Beijing Conference. If by sharing some of my experiences I help the women here at home, in other cultures and in other countries attain their goals and the goals of the Conference, I may have been, in some small way, a valuable participant.

Charlotte Johnson is the President of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.



The International Peace Garden

In the 50th year of the founding of the United Nations, I was honoured as Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) Area President for Canada to accept the invitation of the Women's Institutes of Manitoba to participate at the unveiling of their fountain in the centre of the International Peace Garden last summer. There, at the geographical heart of North America, in this incredibly beautiful garden with the carillon playing in the background, all of us were acutely aware of standing on the longest undefended border in the world, dedicating a fountain of flowing water, the symbol of all life.

Peggy Knapp, ACWW Area President for Canada, and Gwen Parker, former Director of the Manitoba Women's Institutes, are standing in front of the WI fountain plaque at Boissevain, Manitoba.