Beijing diary: ten days at the women's conference

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In the biggest ever United Nations conference, delegates from 180 countries met in Beijing last month for the fourth world conference on women. In the 20 years since the first UN conference on women, the campaign for equality between men and women has witnessed momentous changes and undeniable advances. To date, 139 member states have now signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women adopted by the UN general assembly in 1979. In many countries, women are developing their professional careers and challenging the traditional roles that have been the norm for many years. Progress has been rapid, but inequality remains and the UN recently identified health as one of the areas that needs more attention. The UN conference in Beijing (and the parallel meeting organised by the non-government organisations which was held in Huairou, an hour away from Beijing) aimed to re-examine the issues and to develop a plan of action for the future.

Friday 1 September

I arrive in Beijing for the world conference on women, due to start on Monday. At 9 pm I catch a taxi to the hotel where I have a confirmed booking. When the hotel manager calls the police and takes my passport away I realise I might have a problem. Apparently, as a journalist I am allowed to stay only in designated hotels, and this is not one of them.

At midnight I am sent to the Workers' Stadium to find another hotel. No one speaks much English, but after one look at my visa I am ushered into another taxi, which drives to the Beijing recreation centre. The receptionist looks puzzled and gets out her English-Chinese dictionary. Several hours later I unpack my bags in a half empty journalists' hotel. Two weeks ago the China Organising Committee had told me that there were no hotel rooms left for journalists.

The conference has already achieved notoriety after the Chinese organising committee decided to move the parallel non-government organisations' meeting to Huairou, 50 miles from Beijing. Preconference discussions focus on fears that many key rights for women, established at the UN conferences in Vienna, Cairo, and Copenhagen, might be contested by the Vatican and its allies and by conservative Arab states such as Iran and Sudan. Particular concerns include the right of women to be considered as equal human beings with men and rights to abortion, to own property, and to vote.

Saturday 2 September

Over breakfast I read my complimentary newspaper, the *China Daily*. (The hotel reception staff inform me that there are no international newspapers available.) There is no mention of the biggest ever conference to be held in China. Early morning reports from CNN, one of the United States' television networks reporting the conference, are difficult to interpret owing to massive electrical interference which has developed overnight. Outside my room a desk complete with tablecloth and vase of flowers now furnishes the hallway, where a uniformed attendant begins writing every time I walk past.

As I queue at the conference centre to get my press pass, my out of date Camden Council leisure card holds more credibility than my driver's licence because it

bears my photograph. The press pack includes a compact disk of Chinese folk songs, an invitation to receive a free gift every day at one of the local hotels, and publicity about a new vaginal suppository to enhance vaginal tone after childbirth.

Sunday 3 September

Up in time for a breakfast briefing by the International Planned Parenthood Federation at the Kunlun Hotel on the other side of the city. None of the hotel conference rooms is available, so the meeting takes place in the revolving restaurant. The conference rooms are so "overbooked" that, as yet, no one has been able to book one at all. Some meetings have been held in open areas in the hotel, even in the dark when the management has turned the lights off.

The UN conference opens tomorrow and delegates will spend two weeks debating the final wording of a document intended to influence policy formation. The document, about a third of which has yet to be agreed, addresses 12 critical areas of concern that have been identified as crucial to the changing social and political role of women. It includes a section on reproductive health, which threatens to overshadow all the other issues as it did last year at the population conference in Cairo, when the Vatican opposed the notion of reproductive choice. Chairing this morning's press conference is Fred Sai, chair of the main committee of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and of the main committee in Cairo. "What we achieved in Cairo is not negotiable," he says, "Cairo cannot and must not be a souvenir." The Vatican has permanent observer status at United Nations' conferences and threatens to do battle with member states, notably those in the European Union, over the issue of parental rights and the freedom to express sexuality without discrimination.

Cecilia Royals, a pro-life activist from the National Institute of Womanhood, hands out literature denouncing reproductive education in schools to journalists as they leave the restaurant. "The women of the world want real education free of propaganda," she says "not the pseudoempowerment of contraception, abortion, and sterilisation."

Downstairs in the hotel lobby Nanette Ecker defends the need for education programmes. She is director of training and education at the Global Institute of Training (GIFT), an American organisation that provides educational services in developing countries. "It is not just about providing information," she says. "It is vital to address the values, emotions, and feelings associated with different practices in order to successfully encourage risk reduction."

I discover condoms shaped like rabbits, complete with ears, among the paracetamol in the hotel pharmacy. Later, Virginia Cornue, an American anthropologist studying in Beijing, tells me that this is evidence of China's changing ideology. "In the past," she says, "China promoted a selfless ideology: people worshipped Mao and the state. Since the reforms this has changed. There is a more selfish ideology, and with that has come an awakening of sexuality. Combine this with the one child population policy, and the people of China have begun to reinvent sex as a pleasure seeking exercise and not just for procreation. In Beijing there

Women queue to see
Hillary Clinton speak at Huairou

JASON REED, REUTERS/POPPER/PHOTO

are now several state supported "Adam and Eve" shops—a cross between a sex shop and a hospital outpatient clinic—where people can consult a doctor for psychosexual advice and browse through the dildos and other sex aids.

To Huairou in brilliant sunshine, with food stalls offering the 30 000 delegates pot noodles and chocolate bars. Around the site, workshops are taking place in half built buildings, in classrooms, and under canvas. Apparently, the stone walkways were built in a tremendous hurry by local peasants after the conference for non-government organisations was moved from Beijing to avoid demonstrations and confrontations with feminist activists.

Crammed into a tiny classroom with over 100 other women, I listen to some Nigerian Muslims describe their achievements in the past decade. The Koran recognises women's equal rights and status, they say. Their low status in Muslim societies has less to do with the Koran than with the culture and practices within a society. The speakers encourage women to recognise their rights and unite to fight for them.

Back in Beijing several taxis refuse to take me to the conference centre. In desperation I finally ask to be taken to the building next to the conference centre. No problem, says the driver. I hide my media pass from view.

Shortly after I arrive back in my hotel room there is a knock at the door. The man sitting at the desk outside the lift wants to know my name. By way of explanation he shows me the piece of paper he is writing on, which details my movements around the hotel.

Monday 4 September

In Beijing the conference opens with an extravaganza of Chinese music and dance at the Great Hall of the People, including a giant inflatable dove which floats above the delegates' heads symbolising the conference theme: action for equality, development, and peace. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's opening address is delivered by his special adviser, Ismat Kittani, because the secretary general is unwell and has cancelled his trip to Beijing at the last minute. He calls the struggle to secure equality between women and men "the great political project of the 20th century." The goal of Beijing, he says, is to consolidate the legal advances that have been made so far, to build on the political understandings, and to make commitments to action.

In Huairou, away from the pomp and ceremony, I attend a workshop in an open sided stall led by women from rural Indian villages. They describe how they set

up meetings for women for the first time, overcoming considerable opposition from their families and peers. The women are sharing knowledge about basic health care, including nutrition and sanitation. Initial reports show an improvement in maternal and infant mortality, although they have no data. Their stories of how women struggle to find a voice in a hostile culture make a lasting impression, made more graphic when one of the speakers unexpectedly puts a blob of henna in my palm as a gesture of friendship when I lean forward to ask a question.

In the evening I sit in Tiananmen Square and picture the tanks mowing down prodemocracy demonstrators in 1989. The square is a popular meeting place where families gather to fly their kites. On a nearby building overlooking the square is a massive digital clock, which counts down the seconds to 1997, when China is due to take back Hong Kong.

Tuesday 5 September

At the conference, delegates start to make their opening declarations. Jenny Shipley, New Zealand's minister of women's affairs, uses the opportunity to decry France's decision to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific. She also criticises China for testing a nuclear device only three days after the end of the review and extension conference of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The World Health Organisation has organised a special event on health and invited Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jane Fonda to speak. The event is scheduled to take place in a building with access for only 200 journalists, and no visual or sound relay. Facing a revolt in the press room, the organisers hurriedly move the event to a larger space and broadcast it on closed circuit television. Journalists queue at the crack of dawn for tickets. Everyone I speak to is sending reports home about the nightmare logistics because they can't get access to a decent story.

In her speech, Hillary Clinton, head of the American delegation, criticises policies that violate women's human rights, including forced abortions and sterilisations. This is widely interpreted by the press as a thinly veiled reference to the consequences of China's controversial population policy.

Wednesday 6 September

On my way to Huairou I spend an hour in a traffic jam waiting for Hillary Clinton to drive past, which lengthens the journey to nearly three hours. Heavy rain prevents her from speaking in the open air, so disappointing thousands of women who have queued for hours to hear her speak.

At a press conference Betty Friedan, one of the founders of the women's movement and author of *The Feminine Mystique*, describes the whole conference as a metaphor for women's experience in the world. She says that, despite the inability of the Chinese government to take the conference seriously, a strong positive message is emerging for women's empowerment. "Out of this must come a new vision of equality," she says.

On the bus home a participant in her sixties pushes me ahead of her to sit in a rain soaked seat, allowing her to sit in a dry one. She says that her age gives her special privileges.

Thursday 7 September

Representatives from the non-government organisations with an interest in health meet at 10 am every morning to discuss the debates for the day ahead. So far, the delegates discussing health have made good progress, although many of the more tricky areas are now being negotiated behind closed doors. The main issues that are being debated include the rights of

parents to have access to medical information about their underage children and punitive measures for women who have had abortions.

In the conference halls the UN has to concede that women make up only 11.8% of its officials of the rank of under secretary general or higher. Nor can it answer a journalist who asks why Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has given only seven of the 50 top level appointments to women in the past three and a half years. Angela Kind, director of the organisation's office of human resources management, says that she is trying to recruit and promote women for jobs of all ranks and at the same time encourage men to work in areas currently dominated by women, such as administration.

Friday 8 September

A break from the conference, and a meeting with senior members of the Chinese Medical Association. Dr Liu Jian Li, a gynaecologist, tells me emphatically that the birth rate for girls and boys is nearly the same. I know that the current statistics tell otherwise and query her figures, but this only makes her repeat her version with conviction.

She says that city people are not allowed to have more than one child. In rural areas, if the first child is a girl a couple can have a second child. In mountainous areas, where there is not such a population problem, couples can have another child irrespective of the sex of the first child. This is because in rural areas, boys do heavy work. If a woman falls pregnant again she is recommended to have an abortion, or pay a fine. Most people are happy to have a girl or a boy, she says.

At the end of the first week Australia, India, Tanzania, China, the United States, Ghana, the United Kingdom, and Cambodia have all made definite commitments to change. For example, India proposes to increase its spending on education to 6% of its gross domestic product, with a focus on women and girls. The United Kingdom says that it will withdraw its reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and that it will bolster its domestic child care programme. Turkey says that it is determined to extend compulsory education for girls from five years to eight years and that it is committed to increasing the literacy rate for women by 2% by the year 2000.

Saturday 9 September

On an organised tour to the Great Wall I meet some exhausted staff from the United Nations' accounts department, faced with the unenviable task of counting the money spent and charging it to the Chinese government. The staff seem oddly unaware of the controversy surrounding the organisation's decision to hold the conference in China and of the Chinese decision to move the non-government forum to Huairou.

In the car park a delegate casually asks the tour guide what he thinks about China's human rights policy. Within seconds they are joined by another man standing unnaturally close and listening attentively.

Work continues at the conference, where the Vatican attacks the European Union, accusing it and an unspecified "minority coalition" of "impeding consensus" on the Beijing platform for action. It claims that "a determined coalition" is making "vigorous efforts" to remove all references to religion and motherhood, except when they are portrayed negatively, and to promote a deliberately ambiguous definition of families. Christina Alberdi, head of the delegation from Spain, which is currently president in office of the European Union, dismisses the charges. She says the European Union is concerned that "religion traditionally has not given a position to women." The union also

emphasises that the term family includes households headed by single women.

Sunday 10 September

Egypt's Merwat Tallawy, chair of the main group debating the health section of the Beijing document, holds a press conference to announce that they have made great progress and are nearly at agreement on the issue of parental rights. Negotiations in this sensitive area have been going on for three days so far. Sexual rights is proving to be more contentious. Some say it is a bargaining point for the European Union. The UN is anxious to portray an optimistic picture, although there are plenty who feel that the conference is a wasted opportunity, a jamboree full of empty rhetoric.

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During the second week of the conference the proposed wording for the Beijing declaration and platform for action passed through various committee stages. The final version recommended an end to penalties for abortion; protection for women against rape and other war related crimes; new opportunities for women in politics; and free access to contraception. It also recommended that women should have equal inheritance rights and the right to express their sexuality, although more than 20 delegations registered their reservations. All mention of sexual orientation was deleted, a defeat for the European Union, but Patricia Licuana, chair of the main committee, said that the detailed exchange of views during the two hour discussion preceding the decision to delete laid the ground for this issue to be accepted in the future.

The case for this conference was clear: women in many parts of the world still lack basic human rights such as the right to receive enough food. Girls often receive less than boys. Girls may even be weaned early to allow the mother to get pregnant again quickly, preferably with a boy. Girls often receive little or no education: women currently account for almost two thirds of all illiterate people. Inadequate education also contributes to high pregnancy rates, especially in young women. More than half a million women, nearly all of them in developing countries, die each year of causes related to pregnancy. Women's poor lot is exacerbated by the comparatively few women in positions of power and economic decision making.

At this gigantic conference in Beijing the participants attempted to deal with all of these issues. Through the laborious process of debate the delegates have come up with a document which does not represent a major shift in the world view, more of a significant contribution in the gradual progression towards the goal. The platform for action certainly has provided good ammunition for grass roots organisations to hold their governments to commitments made in Beijing. It has also delineated subjects that are still live issues on which participants at future conferences will focus their attention. Above all, it has given delegates and organisations an opportunity to network and learn from each other and to foster an atmosphere that supports change.

I suspect that some of the practical difficulties experienced by journalists represented more than the predictable chaos and logistical problems of huge events. The reports of these problems may have overshadowed the reporting of the more important debates or issues. But it could be argued that the Chinese authorities' heavy handed attempt to suppress information at this conference graphically illustrates how threatening any attempts to change women's role in society can be. In particular, it gives some idea of the challenge facing anyone attempting to change the status quo in China.