THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN:
THE PRESS AT THE NGO FORUM IN HUAIROU

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Marcy Harman was a member of the only college class attending the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Forum on Women in August 1995 in Huairou, China which took place just before the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women. The Colorado College class, “Global Feminism,” included eleven students and three instructors. Harman is majoring in Religion with an International Studies emphasis.

The ASIANetwork Exchange welcomes short reflective essays by students on their experiences in Asian Studies courses or Study Abroad programs.

Women's perspectives on global issues were the main emphasis of the NGO Forum on Women held in Huairou, China in August/September 1995. The goal of the gathering of 2000 private organizations and 2800 individuals was to provide a forum where women could speak. Unfortunately, the world will never hear most of those voices. The world may never know what really went on in Huairou because the press, challenged by the variety in the conference, challenged by the demand for sensationalism and consumer satisfaction, challenged as well by unethical journalism, spoke with its own voice instead of echoing the voices of women. Not only then did the conference challenge the media, but the media challenged the very premise of the conference: women's rights to speak out.

One of the difficulties the press faced in covering the NGO Forum was managing the great variety of issues that were discussed and the perspectives that were expressed. Hundreds of workshops, plenaries, performances, and demonstrations on topics ranging from Economics and the Environment to Women's Health and Reproductive Rights took place daily during the ten-day conference. Each event was grouped into one of thirteen general subject areas and was open to women from 189 countries. Even the “Platform for Action,” the document revised and ratified at the U.N. Conference, was over 150 pages long. Truly, the breadth of issues and perspectives at the NGO Forum on Women and at the Fourth World Conference on Women was astounding.

Hillary Clinton

Another challenge to good media coverage was to the selective appetites of its consumers. For example, the media focused upon the American president's wife. Although coverage of Hillary Clinton is understandable because she is a high-profile figure, reporting on her should not be substituted for analysis and description of what the women who had traveled from all over the world were saying.

Clinton's sole participation in the conference was to make one speech which only a few hundred people heard. Furthermore, the tone of her speech was quite detached from the emphasis of other events at the conference. While Clinton focused on the inconveniences and injustices that surfaced at the conference, the women actually in attendance concentrated on Education, Women's Rights as Human Rights, or Community Building. So, the sensational trappings surrounding the First Lady of the United States left no room in the press for the important issues of the forum.

Often the media reported what the public wanted or expected to hear. In the United States, currently caught up in tense relations with China, reporters described how the Chinese security x-rayed women's handbags rather than what was discussed by a panel of five Chinese women leaders. This time women were robbed of their voices by international politics.

Unethical journalism

A third challenge to good media coverage was unethical journalism. In one instance, a camerawoman crossed security lines as she climbed a hedge outside the site of Hillary Clinton's address. A security guard motioned that she should move back behind the hedge. She threw her weight against his body, and since he was smaller than
she, he was compelled to push back or else be toppled over. At his resistance, she smirked and turned on her camera. He, still urging her to move behind the security lines, put his hand over the camera lens to deter further taping. At this, the woman pushed harder against him until her assistant finally pulled her back, still smirking, behind the hedge.

The film she taped was the type used to prove the continual harassment of the Chinese police. Actually the camerawoman harassed the guard. She not only intimidated him physically, but she aired his crime to the world, condemning him and his country for “aggression” neither he nor China actually committed against her. In reportage of this quality, journalists are to blame for lack of integrity, and for stifling women’s voices in favor of their own.

The media coverage of the NGO Forum on Women presented a new challenge to the empowerment of women. The conference was designed so that the world could hear women’s voices. Instead, inadequate and biased media coverage contributed to the suppression of those voices.

First, the press pursued the sensational in all aspects of the conference. In concentrating on Hillary Clinton, they simply missed the point of the conference. Furthermore, in seeking the sensational in other women, the media distorted their words.

Ironically, the women at the conference were fighting this misplaced emphasis. All of the women at the conference wanted to be listened to as human beings with valid needs and authentic talents. They did not want to be heard as whores or as goddesses. Until women are no longer viewed as sensational figures, their voices will never be heeded.

Second, in emphasizing stories of police harassment, the media masked the message of the conference which was not the terrible “injustices” of the Chinese police, but rather the empowerment of women to speak out. There is further irony here. The women at the conference were fighting consumerism because, as happened in Huairou, women easily become the victims of supply and demand. In some cases it is their food that is taken, in other cases their bodies. In this case it was their voices.

There is no doubt that the media overlooked, masked, and distorted the voices of the NGO Forum on Women. Amidst overwhelming diversity, demand for sensationalism, the fanning of political antagonisms, and unethical journalism, women’s voices were momentarily muffled. Fortunately, their voices are not lost for those voices live in the women who participated in the conference and took the energy and messages home.

Epilogue

Hillary Clinton remains the symbol of the forum. She is another woman whose voice has not been heard. Like the forum, she has been sensationalized in excessive media coverage. Like the forum, she has been the mouthpiece of political antagonism. Like the forum, she has given hope and bred disappointment. When will we hear her voice?

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CAMPUS PROGRAMS

Kalamazoo College
February 19, 1996, 8 p.m., Olmsted Room, “The Internment Experience of Japanese Americans During the War Years,” Gary Okihiro, Cornell University
April 1, 1996, 8 p.m., Olmsted Room, “The Issue of Comfort Women,” Chunghee Sarah Soh, San Francisco State University

April 11, 1996, 8 p.m., Dow 226, “Japan at War: An Oral History,” Haruyo Cook, Marymount College and Theodore Cook, William Patterson College

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