

U.S. Women in Beijing: The Fourth World Conference on Women and the Global Politics of American Feminism

By Lisa Levenstein

Associate Professor of History
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

levenstein@uncg.edu

© 2013 by Lisa Levenstein

My project explores the national and international dimensions of the late twentieth-century U.S. women's movement by examining American women's participation in the Beijing Women's Conference of 1995. This conference was the largest international gathering of women in world history. During twelve days in September, over 17,000 people from one hundred eighty-nine countries and territories gathered in Beijing and over 30,000 activists attended the accompanying Non-governmental Organization (NGO) Forum in Huairou. While many participants have written about their experiences, my book will offer the first historical study of U.S. participation in the conference based on archival research and oral history interviews. My research suggests that Beijing strengthened alliances, but also exacerbated fissures within the global women's movement and challenged notions of U.S. leadership in the promotion of women's rights and feminist politics.

Most analyses of the Beijing women's conference portray it as the successful culmination of the three previous international women's conferences held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1985. These accounts hail the Beijing Platform for Action's powerful assertion that women's rights were human rights and praise the conference for addressing the concerns of women from the global South (the nations of Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia) to a much greater degree than previous international meetings. Whereas in Mexico City, prominent feminists from the global North had tried to dictate the agenda, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, many U.S. organizations had made a commitment to funding women's groups from the global South

and foregrounding their perspectives.

My work explores the tensions and inequalities structuring this increasingly diverse global women's movement in the 1990s. During the preparatory meetings for Beijing, it became clear that U.S. funding had helped to create a top tier of foreign NGOs that had access to resources that many other organizations in their countries lacked. Similar inequities played out within the United States, as many grassroots organizations—particularly those representing women of color—felt shut out of some of the preparations for the conference. Heightening these distinctions was the fact that Beijing was the first international women's conference to embrace digital technology, fostering a “digital divide” between the rich and poor. Many of the preparatory activities for the conference depended on faxes and the Internet. The conference also broke new ground by featuring a technology center that offered participants free computer training and email accounts. My book will be the first to examine how feminists confronted one of the major challenges for global social movements in the late twentieth century: How to capitalize on the potential of new technology to build alliances and grow their organizations without reinforcing inequalities in access to resources.

While U.S. media coverage of Beijing portrayed the United States as a leader in women's rights, the events of the conference revealed very different dynamics. U.S. journalists interpreted First Lady Hillary Clinton's powerful speech proclaiming that women's rights are human rights as illustrative of the ways the U.S. served as a beacon of hope for the world's women. Yet it was women from the global South who made human rights central to the conference agenda and led the way in crafting the Platform for Action. Many of these women introduced U.S. women to their expansive understanding of feminist politics that addressed poverty, militarization, globalization, and economic development. Further complicating notions of U.S. leadership in women's rights, U.S. social conservatives such as Jerry Falwell traveled to Beijing to join forces with nations working to restrict women's reproductive and sexual freedom. Although the U.S. government delegation spoke out strongly in support of abortion and lesbian rights, it outright refused to engage global feminist

critiques of international monetary and development policies that faulted U.S.-backed structural adjustment programs for impoverishing the world's women. These political struggles that took shape in Beijing reveal that the role of the U.S. in global feminist politics was far more complicated than the celebratory coverage of Hillary Clinton's speech assumed.

During my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), I examined the records of the Ford Foundation, one of the major funders of the Beijing conference, providing assistance for the NGO Forum as well as for U.S. and international women's groups' activities, before and after the event. The records contained numerous grant applications, which included agency proposals, financial records, final reports, agency publications, and the Ford Foundation's internal and external communications concerning grants. I also examined the office files of Marcia Smith, which contained United Nations (UN) and agency reports as well as the Ford Foundation's internal communications regarding grants.

For my purposes, the most valuable sources were the grant applications, which offered a window into the Ford Foundation's approach to the conference as well as significant information about the strategies and outlooks of a wide range of U.S. women's organizations. I was struck by the Ford Foundation's strategic and methodical approach to the conference. The foundation set several priorities, including the development of a media strategy for the conference and the participation of U.S. women of color and women from the global South. Ford Foundation officers identified a cluster of organizations whose applications spoke these objectives and wrote reports justifying the funding of each group in the context of these larger goals. A particularly interesting part of this process was the Ford Foundation's attention to the race and gender makeup of each women's group's staff and its efforts to encourage organizations to diversify their workforce.

The records offered insight into many of the U.S.-based women's groups that participated in the Beijing conference including the International Women's Tribune Center, Ms. Foundation, Black Women's Health Network, Women of Color Resource Center, and the Center for Women's Global

Leadership. While some of the materials these groups submitted to the Ford Foundation are available in other archives, the records offered a unique look at how the organizations justified their work to the foundation. Many groups sent information about their accomplishments, which furthered my understanding of how organizations prepared for the conference, what happened in China, and the degree to which their experiences helped to shape feminist politics on U.S. soil. The collection is particularly strong in its documentation of feminist organizations' efforts to develop media and Internet strategy for the conference and its aftermath. It also has valuable information about the goals and experiences of women of color, particularly African American and Puerto Rican women.

While my research focused on U.S.-based organizations, there is a great deal of information about non-U.S. groups that would be extremely helpful for researchers interested in women's organizations in other countries.

A note on the collection's organization: These records are quite repetitive. Ford Foundation memos, funding proposals, and supporting materials often appear in several different places—sometimes within the same reel of microfilm.

Editor's Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.