

## LADIES SPECIALS

The front page of the *New York Times* the other day described a problem India is having on commuter trains whose passengers are male and female workers traveling to big cities like Bombay and New Delhi. *The Times* reports that the male passengers pinch and grope the women travelers to such an extent, that the Indian government has decided to simply remove men altogether by introducing trains known as “Ladies Specials.

The *Times* also cited that since 1995, the overall number of working women in India has doubled!

Well, 1995 is a benchmark also in other ways. That was the year the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing, China, which I attended. The talk then, which impressed me most, was about “micro-banking,” i.e., when a poor farmer’s wife, who had only one cow, could go to a local bank, put up her cow as collateral and get a loan to buy a second cow. The extra milk she would then have from the second cow would enable her to go to market and sell it and from that profit she might even get a third cow (providing her loan has been paid off) and so on. It made great economic sense and also elevated the status of women.

There was only one “fly in the milk,” so to speak: If the woman with the second cow lived far from the market, she would need a ride and often she would have to pay someone to drive her. If her ride was in a car and not an ox-pulled cart, the car, which was never new, might break down, in which case, time would be lost. And if the woman finally got to market, her milk, or produce, was no longer fresh and she would have less chance to sell. Now, fast forward to fifteen years later and the *Times*’ statistic: working women in India have doubled in that very time period, which means that the daughters of these farm wives of fifteen years ago are not selling milk and produce at the market, but are commuting into the big cities to be part of the work force there.

Who would ever have imagined the need for such trains only fifteen years ago in Beijing, where the up-to-the minute solution to third world economies, and also to women’s emancipation, was deemed to be micro-banking?

Let us backtrack to fourteen years ago: It would never have occurred to me to travel to China, if it had not been for Jayne Howard (Feldman), who was a workshop director at Skidmore that summer, and who, as is the case with so many of our encounters there, urged me to go. I asked her “Why?” And she simply replied: “Because it is important that the Guild be there.”

Her words implied that there was something about “us” which would be an important ingredient in this huge gathering of 35,000 women, that I had a mission, and that by going there, I would find out what that mission was.

And so one day in late August 1995, as I stepped out of my house to go to the airport, my doorman asked me where I was going and I said: “To China.” Believe me, fourteen years ago, that was not yet a common destination.

After close to 25 hours, Flight #801 arrived in Beijing at 8:00 p.m. amidst much confusion. The baggage belt did not work properly and three Chinese men had to constantly clear a spot for new luggage that was coming up from below which had no room on the conveyor belt. This took time. Also, money had to be changed. That took time, too, because by then the buses, which were to transport arriving women who were part of the conference to their hotels, had stopped running. One of the many yellow t-shirted student volunteers who had been assigned as hosts and hostesses—and were stationed 24/7 on floors of the hotels to monitor the conference participants' comings and goings—arranged a taxi for me to my hotel, the Beijing Landmark Towers. It was some 30 hours since I left New York and one exhausted look confirmed that the hotel was new, my room was clean, and the bathroom had everything it was supposed to have.

And now to sleep—to sleep in China.

The next day I had to get myself to the Beijing Workers' Stadium for registration and then find my way to Huairo, where all the non-governmental and unofficial conference participants, of which I was one, were assigned to have their activities.

Actually, a few weeks earlier on the train to Skidmore, Myra Shapiro had given me something to read about Huairo, the town The People's Republic of China had designated for the activities of the NGO's, the non-government affiliated conference participants. The town's name, the article said, meant "soft bosom." That was the first definition. The second definition referred to a certain kind of conduct, which is said to have to do with "when the Emperor keeps a wayward state under control by alternating force with negotiation, or winning re-assurance through the act of conciliation." Huairo, in other words, also meant a concession in exchange for obedience.

Well, the "Emperor," we learned, did not want 35,000 women in its capital, hobnobbing with the 187 government delegations holding official U.N. meetings in Beijing. The People's Republic of China wished to control this unofficial and unpredictable contingent—that "yeast" that could quell and sour the dough—and therefore designated "soft bosom," an hour's drive from Beijing, as the site for those thousands of non-governmental, yet organizationally affiliated, women, of which I was one.

Thus, it came to be that there were 70,000 soft bosoms in Huairo. A wayward state, indeed.

After an hour's drive, my taxi stopped at one of the entrances to the Forum grounds. The driver was told by a uniformed guard that he could proceed no further. I got out and entered a large area which seemed both like a park and an old campus. The size of the weeping willows lining my walkway told me that it had existed long before the Fourth World Conference of Women was conceived. But now, tents had to be erected beyond the original site, where no trees had been planted and rain soon made walking in mud an everyday affair.

At the Global Tent, which served as the "eye" of the Forum, I was handed a copy of the Schedule of Events. It was an oversized paperback book containing 196 pages, listing 3,600

workshops which would take place from August 31 to September 8, 1995. This incredible proliferation meant that every two hours, some 140 workshops were offered, making for 450 workshop offerings every day. And one of these was my own: "Writing the Autobiography: Finding Meaning in Life." It was scheduled for 7:00 p.m. that very evening.

Now it was 2:00 p.m. and raining. Because there were no more seats in the Global Tent and I did not yet know my way, I chose to sit at one of the outdoor tables whose sun umbrella offered partial protection from the rain.

And during the next five hours, until it was time to teach my class, I decided to stay put and familiarize myself with the 3,600 workshop listings. As I began to give this my primary attention, the enormity and significance of these offerings began to sink in. On that very day, there were 40 workshops on the subject of Economy, 37 workshops on Governance & Politics, 47 workshops on Human and Legal Rights, 43 workshops on Health and Human Security, 53 workshops on Education, 41 workshops on Health, 17 workshops on the Environment, 8 workshops on Spirituality and Religion, 17 workshops on Science and Technology, 15 workshops on Media, 14 workshops on Arts and Culture and 18 workshops on Race and Ethnicity. All were presented on that one day with six more days to go!

And who were these 3,600 presenters? The following is only a smattering: The International Migrants Rights Watch, Minnesota NOW Legal Defense & Educational Fund; Yeewi Ieewi Pour la Liberation des Feminines; Muslim Women Georgetown Study Project; Worldwide Network in Development & Environment; The Greenbelt Movement; The Center for Peace & Women's Rights (Somali); Family Health International; Network of African Rural Women's Association; Heifer Project International; Al-Hq Affiliate of International Commission of Jurists; Institute on Creativity of Indonesian Child Workers; Pacific Forum for Women: Law and Development; Ukrainian Center for Women's Studies; Egyptian Association for Industry & Environment; Instituto de Investigaciones; Council of Churches in the Netherlands; Kenya Water for Health Organization; Alianza de Mujeres Costarricense; Women's Union of the Republic of Belarus; The Norwegian Association for Studies of Men; Union Nationale Femmes Des Marocaines, plus several thousand more! Yes, these were the worker bees of the world. No question about that. But their voices and the voices of the positioned delegates in Beijing were held apart!

The hours under the sun umbrella had ticked off. Would anyone show up, I wondered? It seemed to me that it was dinner time and after a full day of workshops, who would want to stay for yet another one?

I gathered my things and walked to School Building 11. And when I opened the door to Room 57, it was full of women and more were jamming in. Soon there was standing room only. I surveyed the sea of faces. It seemed to me I had cast a wide net into the ocean and reeled in every kind of fish. The whole world had come to Room 57.

We eased into the work as if we were at one of our summer conferences. And following the moments when everyone was writing and all heads were bowed, the work was read aloud and each reader identified herself: My name is Salwa Taher, I am from Amman, Jordan; my

name is Maria Dulce, I am from Manila, the Phillipines; my name is Zhu Wang, I am from Kunming, the People's Republic of China; my name is Varaporn Chamsanit, I am from Nonthaburi, Thailand; my name is Eileen Joy, I am from Auckland, New Zealand; my name is Ida Makrure, I am from South Africa; my name is Rebecca Blau, I am from Haifa, Israel; my name is Edita Ostojic, I am from Bosnia, Herzegovina; my name is Lucy Muvotoyeta, I am from Zambia; my name is Pia Zuccolin, I am from Milano, Italy; my name is Satu Elo, I am from Finland; my name is Anne Zanes, I am from New York City, USA; and so on and so on.

I knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was family and that the writing of one's autobiography, one's memoir, was deemed by all as an essential step towards personal freedom via the expansion of consciousness through the process of writing.

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