



Seven FAWCO Trailblazers Attended the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Four World Conferences on Women have been organized by the UN: in Mexico City in 1975; Copenhagen in 1980; Nairobi in 1985; and Beijing in 1995. The Conference in Beijing was a turning point for the global women's movement. Over 17,000 participants attended, including 6,000 government delegates, 4,000 accredited NGO representatives, many international civil servants and about 4,000 media representatives. A parallel NGO Forum took place near Beijing in Huairou, which gathered over 30,000 people. The outcome of the Conference, the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, was adopted unanimously by 189 countries. This agenda is considered "the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights" and "the key global policy document on gender equality."

Seven FAWCO women attended the Beijing Conference in 1995, and returned motivated to become more engaged members of the UN NGO community. They spearheaded FAWCO's successful effort to obtain special consultative status to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1997.

At the FAWCO Conference in Dublin in 2012, Peggy Rigaud received the Circle of Honor Award. Peggy was FAWCO Vice President in 1993, when FAWCO began to explore accreditation by the UN Department of Public Information (now Global Communication). In October 1994, Peggy and former FAWCO President Barbara Johnson attended a regional preparation conference for Beijing in Vienna. (FAWCO UN Liaison Laurie Richardson chairs the NGO Committee on the Status of Women Vienna and works with several of the Austrian women who were the main organizers of these preparations.) Ann Day, then President of AWA Vienna, recommended that FAWCO pursue affiliation with ECOSOC. In 1995, FAWCO was represented at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Copenhagen. At the 1995 FAWCO Conference in Nairobi, Peggy and others developed the FAWCO Platform for Beijing, with four goals: education, eradication of violence against women, environment, and work opportunities.

In June 1995, FAWCO received DPI accreditation and in September 1995, seven FAWCO trailblazers went to Beijing.

Peggy Rigaud (Languedoc-Roussillon AWG)

Helen Hootsmans (Amsterdam AWC)

Lois Pot (Hague AWC)

Jeanne Schapp (London AWC)

Leslie Fiack (Taunus AWC)

Donna Sebti (Casablanca AWC)

Becky Tan (Hamburg AWC)

For Beijing+20 in 2015, we asked them to reminisce about their experiences in Beijing. Here are some of their reflections and memories.

Helen Hootsmans: “The highlights of the conference for me were Hilary Clinton’s provocative speech; the increasing strength of the NGOs; and the unity, despite the diversity of the 17,000 Forum participants, regarding the position of women in all fields. I left with hope for the future so well expressed by Bella Abzug, 'In Mexico, they gave us a day; for Nairobi, a decade; perhaps now they’ll give us the world.' ”

Peggy Rigaud and Donna Sebti: “We had had no idea what to expect at the conference in Beijing, or if it would even take place. The Chinese thought we would be hordes of hippies overrunning the place. There was a sign on the door: 'When dressed in rags, refused coming in.' There were thousands of porta potties lined up along the streets. Sometimes there was only one person in a large hotel who could speak any English, so we survived on minimum communication and lots of laughs. Beijing was truly the experience of a lifetime.”

After Beijing, at a Regional Meeting in The Hague, the theme was “Back from Beijing and Beyond.” Beyond meant applying for ECOSOC consultative status. In August 1997, FAWCO was granted consultative status to ECOSOC.

As Peggy said, in the process of applying for this status, she learned “how very impressive FAWCO's member clubs and individuals are. I made long lists of activities carried out all over the world, in aid of women, children, education, health, the environment, etc.”

Asked what difference our UN status has made to FAWCO, Peggy said: “we have become increasingly aware of how powerful we can be; of how much our work can influence the world scene; and we are becoming more and more citizens of the world.”