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Testimony from Azza Charara Baydoun

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I did not participate in the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), known as the Beijing Conference, held in September (9th -14th), 1995 because I felt it was more of a "festival" than a conference. Heads of official delegates of participating countries as well as various international agencies were to deliver speeches announcing the famous Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,¹ the content of which will not be discussed but only approved. The twelve critical 'areas of concern' the preceding months in numerous meetings and forums hosted by the UN and its organizations in its central as well as regional headquarters.

However, I did attend and participated in more than one Lebanese and Arab workshops and forums in preparation for the conference during the months preceding it. I also participated in the proceedings of the Forum hosted by the UN Economic and Social Counsel (Preparatory Committee - Prep. Com. II) in the headquarters of the United Nations -New York, in the Spring of 1995, where official and NGOs delegations from all over the world -Lebanese and

¹ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:

The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 countries, sets an agenda for women's empowerment and is considered the key global policy document on gender equality. It sets strategic objectives and actions for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality in 12 critical areas of concern, namely: Women and poverty, Education and training of women, Women and health, Violence against women, Women and armed conflict, Women and the economy, Women in power and decision-making, Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, Human rights of women, Women and the media, Women and the environment, The girl-child.

More than 17,000 participants attended the conference, including 6,000 government delegates at the negotiations, along with more than 4,000 accredited NGO representatives, a host of international civil servants and around 4,000 media representatives. A parallel NGO Forum held in Huairou, near Beijing, drew some 30,000 participants.

Detailed information can be retrieved from:
<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>

Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf

Arab among them- participated in discussing and redrafting of the Declaration and Platform for Action to be issued by the conference.

My contribution to this publication is a letter, dated June 1995, that I sent to one of the coordinators of "Middle East Research Competition- MERC" program - Ford Foundation - Cairo that sponsored my participation in these preparatory conferences, workshops and forums. I was one in a group of a dozen or more Arab women researchers who were, at the time, granted scholarships from MERC in order to carry out research in the field of women studies, and were, at the same time, active in feminist non-governmental organizations. In this letter, I reported my impressions about the mentioned preparatory conference in New York and the thoughts it provoked in me. Its content expresses "dazzlement" of a feminist researcher / activist by what the global women's movement had accomplished during the previous 20 years, 15 of which we –the Lebanese women– marginalized ourselves from a raging civil war that 'froze' the seminal local Feminist movement (as all social movements), and limited our interest in its global counterpart. FWCW seemed to me a long overdue instance for us - Lebanese women- to rejoin Feminists worldwide again.

Hereunder, is the letter / 'report' as was written at the time, with minor alterations and few endnotes added by way of identifying certain words, names and acronyms that may have been common knowledge when written, but are no more.

June 20, 1995

Dear Leila²

Greetings from Beirut!

Your letter, dated May 16 (and reaching me June 16!), provided an incentive for me to 'take the time' and put in writing my impression of Prep. Com. II as a whole, and recapitulate its impact on my personal as well as my organizational work.³

Activities

Let me enumerate the activities I participated in during the ten days stay in New York. It consisted of attending the following:

- 1- The general meeting of all NGO delegates (The opening session of the forum).
- 2- NGO consultation discussions of the working paper of NGO amendments to the draft of UN Platform for Action, sections B and C (Education and Health areas of concern).
- 3- Several meetings of the Health caucus.
- 4- A couple of meetings of the Arab caucus.
- 5- Several panels and workshops on mental and physical health of women.
- 6- Panels on Mass Media, Religion and Spirituality, Women and Statistics, Women and Negotiation,
- 7- In addition to two panels organized by the Arab caucus, one of which I chaired.

² Leila Husseini was a project manager of MERC- the Ford Foundation- Cairo in the year 1995.

³ Referring to affiliation to the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers.

‘There is no going back’

The impact of this experience on me was not unidimensional. It stimulated my intellect, mobilized my sense of activism, and last but not least it ‘rekindled my emotions’. Having been an activist for Women’s Liberation in the 60’s and 70’s (of the last century), and having had to ‘retreat’ and marginalize myself due to the prevailing violence during the Lebanese wars, I was overwhelmed by tangible progress women all over the world, especially the third world, have achieved. Manifestly, they have reached out to the **Public** and can never be confined again to the **Private**, and – as Ms. Santiago⁴ declared in the opening session ‘There is no going back’. Women, as the NGO delegates of this meeting claimed, are taking matters into their own hands, and their ‘matters’ seemed to have expanded to comprise issues that few decades ago were the concern of men exclusively. I am referring to concerns comprising armed conflicts, economy, environment... to name a few. Women seemed to me to be embracing the whole world with open arms!

But what I felt was more significant was that as these women were coming out into the **Public**, they brought along the **Private**. This is best expressed by listing ‘Violence against Women’ one of the 12 major ‘Areas of Concern’ considered in the conference, as well as numerous issues challenging normalised, and sometimes religiously sanctified, gender - based ideas, attitudes and behaviours.

⁴ The Philippines Executive Director of the NGO Forum on Women ‘95, Huairou, China. One of main speakers of the opening session.

Climate and spirit

The panels and workshops on the areas of concern listed in the draft of the document were the activities that gave substance to the prevailing atmosphere. These (panels and workshops) provided the means to expose the salient issues specific to each country to an interested sympathetic public. The discussions following the presentations of panellists and felicitators were most illuminating and provided a frame of rich exchange revealing similarities in spite of apparent differences. They provided the chance for attendants and participants to exchange information, experiences, publications, and a promise for further communication.

I was glad to observe the general spirit of tolerance that prevailed among the NGO delegates. Debates seemed to focus on issues, not on individuals or their affiliations even when viewpoints presented were widely divergent. I witnessed sympathy and mutual understanding among women of different cultures, races and creed.

Activities and Skills

The process of lobbying of the Lebanese governmental delegates to the Prep. Com. II, I did not follow closely. (The official Lebanese UN delegate was not even there!). My preference was to attend activities that revolved around my research interests and / or the process of lobbying, be it in the general meetings or the different caucuses. In the general meeting of NGO consultations discussing the working paper of NGO amendments to the draft of UN platform of action, for instance, I sadly observed that that we, the Arab NGO delegates were marginal. The mentioned discussion was dominated by 'experts' on the subjects (I am particularly referring to sections

B and C of the document⁵) who were well prepared in more than one way; they were knowledgeable in lobbying techniques and manifested a solid background and follow up of women's issues in their own country and worldwide. These women master the English language and are familiar with the 'jargon' of the UN discourse.

Furthermore, the NGO activities I participated in seemed to me to be the end product of a chain of activities which we- the Lebanese delegates- were not familiar with. These activities were executed by NGOs in other countries among grassroots and their outcomes were carried upwards by women leaders as concerns which are, then, formulated in strategies worth lobbying for by the NGO delegates in a UN meeting like this one.

What I say does not undermine the value of the participation of Lebanese (and Arab) NGOs in this meeting. On the contrary, this participation has been eye- opening and a most important occasion for us to mobilise around issues and concerns put forth and elaborated by women worldwide and would provide for us - hopefully- the incentive for hard work needed at all levels to catch up with them and make up for years lost due to our devastating wars.

Personal note

On a personal note, I was happy to observe that my own Feminism has evolved over the years in a way strikingly similar to that of many individual women, as well as groups of women, of different affiliations and cultures. The prevailing discourse was not tinged

⁵ Education and health areas of concern

with the 'anger' that fueled our 60's and 70's Feminist discourse, but was rather that of concern of the well-being of all women and men of all ages, races, creeds, sexual orientations...and other subdivisions- marginalised people mainly. It seemed to me that these women strove for **equality** in order to participate more efficiently in the **development** of their societies and create more space and better opportunities for them to be tougher activists for world **peace**. Demands for Gender equality by way of asserting themselves seemed to me much less of a preoccupation.

Evaluation

A minor remark on the cooperation of the members of the group of Arab women sponsored by the MERC- the Ford Foundation to this meeting:

In the Cairo meeting hosted by MERC, and which preceded immediately Prep. Com. II of N.Y., the mentioned group manifested an admirable capacity for smooth communication and fruitful exchange. A similar daily meeting in N.Y., if arranged for, with the aim of exchange and discussion would have been a valuable opportunity by way of giving a comprehensive meaning to individual experiences. Unfortunately, this did not happen. I hope that follow up of this exceptional opportunity will take place one way or another.

Finally, allow me my dear Leila to express my appreciation of the way you coordinated matters- you are a great debrouilliard! I would also like to thank MERC- the Ford Foundation for giving me personally and The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers- BAHITHAT (which I represented in this meeting together with Mona

Khalaf⁶) the unique opportunity of being a witness to the process of preparation for the Fourth World Conference for Women. It most certainly affected my vision of what women's current concerns and placed my interests and activities in a new perspective. I am more than ever convinced that doing research on Women and Gender- which is what I do- is in line with 'my' Feminism and that The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers is an objective necessity in the Arab World of today and has a lot to present to women advancement.

Sincerely yours,
Azza Charara Baydoun

⁶ Then, Assistant professor in LAU, and a member of Lebanese Association of Women Researchers.