



**Mitchell Hamline School of Law**  
**Mitchell Hamline Open Access**

---

## Faculty Scholarship

---

1996

# U.N. Women's Event Unleashed Powerful Ideas

Ann Juergens

*Mitchell Hamline School of Law*, [ann.juergens@mitchellhamline.edu](mailto:ann.juergens@mitchellhamline.edu)

## Publication Information

14:3 William Mitchell Magazine, spring (1996)

---

## Repository Citation

Juergens, Ann, "U.N. Women's Event Unleashed Powerful Ideas" (1996). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 118.  
<http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/facsch/118>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Mitchell Hamline Open Access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Mitchell Hamline Open Access. For more information, please contact [sean.felhofer@mitchellhamline.edu](mailto:sean.felhofer@mitchellhamline.edu).



[mitchellhamline.edu](http://mitchellhamline.edu)

---

## U.N. Women's Event Unleashed Powerful Ideas

### **Abstract**

Juergens describes her experience at the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, where a "Platform for Action", the U.N. action plan for women and girls was created.

### **Keywords**

China, free speech, Non-Governmental Organizations Forum of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, inequality, women

### **Disciplines**

Comparative and Foreign Law | International Law | Law and Gender

# U.N. Women's Events Unleashed Powerful Ideas

## By Ann Juergens



**T**HE BEIJING waiter, arms wide apart, stretched the snake as another man slit its throat. They served the fresh blood in a dainty china cup to the guest of honor, neatly skinned

the reptile, coiled it on a platter, and whisked it to the kitchen for cooking. My hosts, Liu Li, '89, and Zhao Yan, '88, laughed and assured me they had not ordered the same for us.

The ritual at that nearby table punctuated our conversation about the Chinese government. Li and Yan, who practice commercial law in Beijing, explained the current state of freedom of expression in China: They could say anything while we were at the restaurant or among ourselves, but they would be in deep trouble if, for example, they were in a school or public square and referred to the 'Tiananmen "massacre."

Still, the two lawyers, owners of a rapidly growing practice serving privately owned businesses, expressed optimism that greater capitalism would lead inevitably to greater political freedom for the Chinese people. The main challenge now, they said, is in how to privatize business without causing millions of people to starve.

Fresh snake blood is a monied person's delicacy in a land where starvation still threatens a portion of its 1.2 billion people. Freedom of expression is a delicacy that is not available to many in China.

I spent 11 days in China last September at the Non-Governmental Organizations [NGO] Forum of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women. I left feeling renewed awe for the power and

the fragility of the idea of free speech. In spite of my friends' optimism, China's leaders are showing the world that tolerance of free speech does *not* inevitably flow from tolerance of private enterprise. Almost 50 percent of business in China is now in private hands, yet the Chinese government felt compelled to move the NGO Forum to Huairou, a town 30 miles north of Beijing. It was common knowledge among the Chinese, I was told, that the NGO Forum was relocated to keep the ideas expressed from corrupting the Chinese people.

More than 30,000 women and girls from around the world gathered at the NGO Forum, and another 17,000 at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Many who attended felt that the twin events had woven alliances that in time could change the world — and change it not as a war, presidential election, or new technology might, but in the way that exchanges of *ideas* can change the world.

Following the conference, people asked: "What did it really accomplish?" My answer evolved to: "Never underestimate the power of citizens gathering, debating, learning about each other, and cooperating to make the world a better place."

The conference on women was years in the planning. The ideas were set in motion in 1975, which the United Nations declared International Women's Year. That was followed by the Decade for Women, 1976-1985. In 1979, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In 1985, it held a conference in Nairobi, which adopted "Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women."

Meanwhile, U.N. studies found that while women make up half of the world's population, they perform nearly two-thirds of all work, receive one-tenth of the world's income, own less than one-hundredth of all property, comprise two-thirds of illiterate adults, and are bought and sold in expanding international sex and labor markets. Wages for women in all countries average 30-40 percent less than for men doing comparable work. Worldwide, only one elected politician in nine is a woman. Girls are immunized at a much lower rate than boys, and by age 18 have

received 4.4 years less education than boys.

The 1995 world meeting was announced with the purpose of formulating governmental *action* to address the continuing inequality of women and girls.

But governments need help from concerned citizens to create change. So two overlapping events were planned: the governments' Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, and the NGO Forum. The official conference was attended by government-appointed representatives. Its agenda was to hammer out a consensus on a "Platform for Action," the U.N. action plan for women and girls.

**T**HE NGO FORUM was a rich global stew of people working at the grassroots on issues affecting women and families. I represented William Mitchell College of Law. No official invitation was necessary, just an early application and success in obtaining a visa. Most of the people at the NGO Forum were not employees of governments, although there was a heavy sprinkling of educators, some government supported, and women judges. The thousands of NGOs ranged from the Asia Indigenous Women's Network from the Philippines, to Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, to Water for Women's Health of Kenya, to the Zambia Association of Media Women.

These are the people whose work and research provide the factual foundation for many governmental policies, whether the subject is health care, education, land use, public works, or how agricultural credit money should be spent. NGOs also are key in implementing new laws after they are passed. They also monitor laws and tell governments when a law or policy is or isn't working. In Huairou, NGOs led hundreds of workshops daily, where they exchanged ideas about their work and cultures and attempted to influence the outcome of their governments' debate over the Platform for Action.

The Platform does not have the formal force of law. Rather, it is an agenda and policy statement, organized around 12 "Critical Areas of Concern" for women:

- the increasing burden of poverty on women;
- inequality in and unequal access to education;

**PROFESSOR ANN JUERGENS** teaches civil clinic and lawyering and was one of the developers of the feminist jurisprudence course at William Mitchell College of Law. She is co-director of the clinic and co-author, with Professors Peter Knapp and Roger Haydock, of the Lawyering Skills Video Series and, with Haydock, Knapp, David Herr '78, and Jeffrey Stemple, of *Lawyering: Practice and Planning* (both West, 1996).

- inequality in and unequal access to health care;
- violence against women;
- the effects of armed conflict on women;
- inequality in economic structures and in access to resources;
- inequality in the sharing of political power and decision making;
- inadequate mechanisms for promoting the advancement of women;
- lack of respect for the human rights of women;
- unequal access to and stereotyping in the media;
- gender inequality in the management of the environment; and
- persistent discrimination against girl children.

No U.N. document will lead the world to radically reorganize the distribution of its resources. Yet the Platform for Action is testament to the beginning of a global consensus that women and girls should not be valued less than men and boys and must not be treated worse than other humans by reason of their gender. Its creation gave NGOs the occasion to spin networks that span all national boundaries. It was no coincidence that many grassroots ideas from around the world that were discussed at the conference soon got attention in the mainstream Western media.

For example, an article on the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh — which makes “microloans” to women otherwise denied access to credit and which has a 97 percent repayment rate — appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*. People combating the increasing incidence of female genital mutilation in the United States were highlighted in the *New York Times*. The almost 6,000 dowry-related murders of wives by their husbands in India last year was considered newsworthy by the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. *Business Week* seriously discussed the merits of including women’s unwaged work in the calculation of Gross National Product.

The Platform’s statement of aspirations also will be useful in advocacy before international and national agencies. At the Forum, women from Asia and Africa told tales of using U.N. conventions, ratified by their governments but having no enforcement provisions, as critical documentary support for arguments that their governments, for example, must not forbid the testimony of women at rape trials, or must

allow mothers to have a say in residence, education, or healthcare decisions for their children.

Perhaps most important, the Platform supports women in their struggles for equality and access to resources. Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her speech at the Forum, urged NGOs to reduce the Platform — now a daunting 198 pages — to a one-page statement that could be distributed to every woman in every corner of the world. Every woman and girl should know that the world at least professes to believe that they have the right to say no to sex, that they have as much right as males to go to school or borrow money for a small business or small farm, and that they should be nourished — and cherished — as much as men and boys. While this information will not instantly make food or school or health care equally available to females, or stop violence against them in their homes and on the streets, it is a necessary precursor to real and effective programs.

**SEVERAL THEMES** at the NGO Forum will be of particular relevance to lawyers into the next century. First, as the economy rapidly becomes globalized, so do legal ideas. At the Forum, women from Bangladesh and the Philippines who worked in sweatshops for the same multinational company traded ideas for dealing with inhumane working conditions and discussed the development of international labor standards and unions. Women’s advocates from seven continents eagerly shared experiences with laws and enforcement policies in the search for effective ways to deal with domestic violence. As consensus builds on the kind of treatment every woman deserves, governments will be subject to pressures to conform their laws to that standard. At least one group at the Forum urged adoption of legal sanctions — similar to those that helped pressure South Africa to end racial apartheid — against Iran and other nations that enforce gender apartheid.

Second, people of the “developed” world need to listen carefully to those from “developing” worlds. This is as true whether we are seeking business agreements or solutions for our own problems of poverty, violence, spiritual emptiness, and disintegration of trust for government and social institutions. One of the most striking features of the NGO Forum was scene after scene of U.S. and European women listening raptly to women from

India, Africa, South America, and Asia describe innovative experiments to ameliorate social conditions or develop their local economies in ways that included women. If we in the United States must learn to accomplish more with less, then we should take care to learn from those who for centuries have done more with less.

I heard women from rural South Asia and Africa with no more than elementary school formal educations who had a better understanding of the global economy than do I or most of my students. Some of the most promising economic development ideas — such as targeting micro-loans to women struggling to lift their families out of poverty — originated or have been tested most thoroughly in developing countries. The creation of international agreements, whether a set of global standards for the treatment of women or a business contract, also requires understanding of and sensitivity to cultural and religious law.

One theme that hit close to home was the campaign to make women’s unwaged work more visible. “Women count, count women’s work” was a slogan I had not heard before, yet I recognized instantly what it meant. The International Count Women’s Work Campaign does not necessarily seek wages for the work women do in caring for children, for elderly parents, or on subsistence farms. Rather, it seeks to have all of the invisible work people do — most unwaged work is still performed by women — measured and included in calculations of productivity such as GNP. In that way, businesses, governments, and NGOs will be able to gauge the effects of their rules and policies on that workload, on productivity, and will have the information to make macro-economic decisions more wisely. For example, some argue that the current trend in this country to relieve government of its burden of caring for the poor, children, the disabled, and the sick does not take into account the likelihood that that will transfer work disproportionately onto women’s shoulders. Others expect that including a woman’s unwaged work as part of her productivity would lead to a different calculation of Social Security benefits.

The essential idea is to make care-giving and family-sustaining work more real to society, business, and government and to help us value it more deeply. It’s an idea that could change the world. ☐