

# A Word to the WISE

Advancing women in the OSH profession

JUNE 2015

A TECHNICAL PUBLICATION OF ASSE'S WOMEN IN SAFETY ENGINEERING COMMON INTEREST GROUP

## Beijing to Geneva to New York City

The Long Road Toward Protecting Health for All by Increasing STEM Opportunities for Women

BY ILISE FEITSHANS, J.D., SCM, DIR

The true-to-life image of only one or two women in a crowded field of male engineers was not a fantasy a generation ago, as exemplified by the group portrait of male trustees of Virginia Commonwealth University hung in its academic building in 2015. Only through close observation could one find the sole woman nestled at the rear of the desk, seated alongside a lamp.

Women's progress toward equal employment opportunities to do the hard work of ensuring health and security for all in the STEM professions is inextricably tied to implementing the platform of action for women's rights prepared by the UN in China in 1995. That platform is a complex and verbose document that is undergoing a global strategic review, first in Geneva, Switzerland among the regions of the world and then in New York City before the UN's commission on the status of women.

This article outlines key concerns discussed in the process called the Beijing plus twenty review, offering a glimmer of insight about where the UN signatory nations were in 1995, where steps forward for women in STEM have been made and the way forward to implement this critical social change beyond paper promises.

By including women in STEM, and using women's previously untapped talents to advance the health and safety engineering professions, there is a greater chance of enhanced workplace health for all. To monitor the



progress made toward equal opportunity for women, the Beijing plus twenty processes brought governments, academia, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations together twice recently—in November 2014 at the UN in Geneva Switzerland and in March 2015, at the UN in New York.

The single goal for these elaborate and expensive weeks of international meetings was to review long-term impacts and long-term obstacles to gender equality that have come up in the 20 years after the Beijing platform for action was adopted at the UN 4th world conference on women in 1995. There was widespread consensus that governments and the private sector should be encouraged

to finally implement the commitments undertaken in Beijing in 1995 that have not been fulfilled.

Surprisingly, there was consensus that despite progress towards equal employment opportunity, many gaps remained from the standpoint of wages, accessible child care, paid maternity leave and most of all, access to training in areas such as science and math which were considered inappropriate for girls education in previous generations.

**Across many areas of law and social policy, access to high quality education with jobs remains a key obstacle to equality.**



The Beijing plus twenty regional review meeting in Geneva was co-hosted by the UN economic commission for Europe and UN Women. Representatives from 48 countries shared consensus that as part of their continued commitment to empowering women governments must implement legislation, provide sufficient funds at national and local levels, and improve sex-disaggregated statistical reporting in order to monitor progress and challenges. Chairpersons were Hijran Huseynova, chair of the state committee for family, women and children affairs, Azerbaijan, Carlien Scheele, director, gender equality and LGBT equality department, ministry of education, culture and science, Netherlands. The rapporteur was Thomas Fitschen, ambassador, deputy permanent representative of Germany to the UN, Geneva. To follow-up, in March 2015 [review conclusions](#) were sent to the commission on the status of women in New York.

The deliberations were the first step towards evaluating the long-term impact of the principles codified in the Beijing platform document for the first time, on a global level. Despite increased awareness and advances in legal expertise on discrimination and women's rights, possibilities for women and girls to claim redress when their rights have been violated are insufficient.

Across many areas of law and social policy, access to high quality education with jobs remains a key obstacle to equality. The importance of access to education could not be understated, and has been the subject of several subsequent UN initiatives. For example, in Europe the Marie Curie grants and fellowships make a special effort to find, and fund research opportunities for women in sciences.

Although most ECE countries are parties to the committee on the elimination of discrimination against women convention, many face difficulties in fully implementing it. The committee is currently developing a general comment on access to justice. Across the ECE ad-hoc bodies and inter-ministerial structures have been created. The capacities of national mechanisms to implement, coordinate, and monitor gender equality policies, and their possibility to hold others accountable, however, remain limited. They often lack adequate resources, and coordination remains a challenge.

Even where women can be considered employed, they are disproportionately found in precarious employment, part-time employment, lower paid jobs or suffering from wage discrimination. In 2013, only 1 out of every 4 parliamentarians in ECE countries was a woman. Gender quotas to increase women's representation in government have been introduced in some countries, yet women remain underrepresented in key decision-making spheres throughout the ECE region, and there was consensus that the absence of female perspective influences the funding for programs and the ability to implement legislation advancing women.



Dr. Ilise L. Feitshans in front of the group portrait of male trustees at Virginia Commonwealth University.

### Voices that Made the Statements

#### Why Did The UN Need a Womens' Conference?

The author attended the non-governmental organization (NGO) forum of the UN fourth world conference on women, August through September 1995 in China. Subsequently, the author served as a delegate for the global alliance for women's health, which is an accredited NGO of the UN. Accredited means granted a special status by the United Nations, allowing members of the organization to participate in meetings at the UN and on rare occasions provide information or lobby official delegates from member nations about pressing issues. This function closely resembles its antecedent in the U.S. Congress or other legislative bodies. NGOs frequently unite to strategize, share information and ultimately influence UN international policy decisions, in manner that also closely resembles the work of lobbyists in any nation's government. The meeting represented a major vehicle for exchanging information and for setting a global policy agenda to protect the health, provide education and support women's rights throughout the world.

The Beijing declaration is the preamble to the platform for action. In language that unsurprisingly harkens back to the declaration of sentiments of the women who demanded suffrage a hundred years before in New York's Seneca Falls, the preamble notes commitment to:

"The equal rights and inherent dignity of women and men...ensure the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The 1995 NGO forum at the UN fourth world conference on women was the first half of a two-part conference, a division that was confusing. First, the NGO Forum began on Aug. 31, 1995, and ended Sept. 8, 1995. Second, the official diplomatic delegates to the fourth world conference on women met from Sept. 4, 1995, through Sept. 15, 1995.

The second conference produced the so-called platform document, and involved a famous speech in which First Lady Hillary Clinton proclaimed, “Women’s rights are human rights.”

It is worth noting, however, that there were many male diplomatic delegates to the second conference, and few males in attendance at the NGO Forum. There was an officially printed and electronically transmitted tangible product for the second part of the conference, but the NGO forum did not produce any written accounts or official transcripts of its work. Some individuals had credentials to both parts of the conference, furthering the confusion.

The NGO forum produced more than 5,000 workshops on policy issues affecting women concerning every imaginable topic. Some attendees distributed papers informally at the workshops, while others photographed each other and exchanged addresses. There was no formal list of NGO registrants, no formal message center for locating people, and most critically, no official written product of these meetings. Nonetheless, videotapes of the NGO Forum demonstrate that it produced invaluable reports, documents and souvenirs, although it did not produce a treaty or a convention or other example of the rule of law.

The NGO forum’s heritage reaches far back into the UN, a 50-year history that reached critical mass at the

Nairobi meeting of the third UN world conference on women. There, more than 300 NGOs assembled spontaneously in tents that they had built outside of the official diplomatic meeting. It made Nairobi the buzzword for a watershed moment in UN history.

Afterward, NGOs were included in a new, stronger role as part of the fabric of UN deliberations. The change after Nairobi represents a new wave of democratization within international legislation and policy, as NGOs speak for people, not governments. They are not elected, but often represent the views of minorities or the oppressed as a counterweight to government.

We like this result when NGOs oppose repressive regimes; but the success of the NGOs also implicitly represents an erosion in the power and influence of all governments, whose sovereignty are guarded by the terms and conditions of the UN charter, regardless of the nature of their regimes. This is an important feature of the NGO forum and the UN fourth world conference on women because this influential but threatening—for some governments, subversive—role may explain in part why so much confusion, almost a deliberate diplomatic fog, surrounded the preparations for the meetings.

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**What Happened at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women?**

There is significant debate about the significance of what happened at the NGO forum. Delegates came home from China only to find that a truly exciting and vibrant meeting was described in scant news reports that concentrated on the pouring rain, bad housing, muddy tents, bacteria in food and undue surveillance, rather than reporting accurately upon the hard work of the meetings.

Another facet of this misunderstanding, however, cannot be laid at the feet of the media. Rather it suggests an intrinsically feminist approach to communication and products, compared to the process and result that lay at the heart of the NGO forum. The activities that occurred at the NGO forum—meetings, workshops, exchanges of ideas, transfer of otherwise unobtainable and possible illegal clandestine information—are, according to feminist theory, characteristically female types of communication.

In this model of communication, process is the product. The goal is education through communication, without providing documentation of the process or the work, much the same way that a mother or grandmother might convey important unwritten information to their child. This process of communication is the hallmark of child rearing, which until recently was if not exclusively, then at least traditionally, the heart of women’s empow-



Documents from the UN Women's Conference.

erment domain. This approach, feminist theory posits, takes a long-term approach to learning and sharing ideas through unwritten communication.

The goals of communication for exchange of ideas are not precisely quantified; they remain long-term, rather than easily achieved. Children for example, learn to speak by imitating their mothers as best that they can, but not in one or two days. Process-oriented communication develops a profound common bond between the participants. This makes talking the heart of the process and a prized result.

### What Was Accomplished by the NGOs?

The NGO forum united many women from every part of the world. Many common issues that should play a greater role in the international policy agenda were discussed, especially health issues, education for women and child care. In contrast to the NGO Forum, diplomatic delegates produced an official document, whose significance will offer perennial debate among legal scholars and historians.

The differences between these parts of the same whole are underscored by one visual image: in contrast to the NGO forum where women wore colorful sari, kimonos, t-shirts or dashikis, as of Sept. 3, there was an increasingly steady incoming stream of well-groomed men in silk suits and designer ties who came as caretakers and participants in the second part. They performed official, documented tasks. Tight security around those diplomats had a chilling effect on meetings. They also had a vast cadre of secretarial staff to transcribe and record their every word.

I learned by presenting three workshops at the NGO Forum, when thousands of women come together in any given place to exchange ideas about their situation and strategize about improving the world, and securing world peace for their children and parents and partners, language barriers and differences of experience become interesting but unimportant. It is a powerful, dynamic time when those differences melt away.

### New York & Beyond, But Where Next?

Perennial issues addressed in the Beijing platform for action have not been solved, despite government efforts, which are insufficient according to the data discussed at the review. For example, discriminatory stereotypes influence the educational choices of women and restrict their future employment opportunities in science and technical areas. Gender-based violence penetrates all areas of life and affects women of all ages worldwide today. Women in the safety and health professions are especially key in shaping programs that can target the prevention of such violence and provide support for women who have been victims of violence, whether



Israel speaks at UN ECE.

that support comes from resources in the workplace, the community or at home.

Women in the safety and health professions also can play a key role in mentoring by informing male colleagues men about the inaccuracies of professional stereotypes, or by mentoring to help women enter the STEM professions. Despite policy efforts undertaken over the last two decades, the ill health caused by violence against women continues to exist in every country. All these factors lead to a persistent gender pay gap and sharply lower pension payments for women as compared to men.

Many countries reported significant legislative progress, nonetheless there was strong consensus that education for women is the linchpin for climbing out of disempowerment by obtaining well paying jobs. This notion was underscored at the global symposium "Women Changing the World," a parallel event to the UN activities that was live streamed across the globe. At Barnard College, speaking at a panel discussion Queen Noor of Jordan underscored these key points, noting that human rights and education to promote those rights remain important for women around the world. Better education in the gap-areas of science technology engineering and math are one way to ensure that the existing gaps will diminish.

### New Issues

An emerging health issue that will impact access to health insurance and quality health care for women is the projected gender gap in pensions and retirement income. Unequal pensions will redefine the feminization of poverty because men work full time and in large percentages max out pension rights. By contrast, women more often hold lower paying or precarious employment, lose jobs or abstain from work for caretaking of

partners, older family and children and have lower paying jobs due discrimination and lack of pay equity. In this aspect of preventing new health disparities, the safety and health and environment professions have a key role to play protecting the health for all.

But, in the realm of enriching the advancement of safety and health through the applications of women's perspectives to the overall professional ethos, there is good news. It was noted anecdotally in NGO meetings in New York also, that women who have arrived in the STEM professions (including safety, health and environment professions) exhibit different trends for manifesting their leadership and have a keen ability to target areas that require attention that may have been overlooked in the past.

This perspective, regardless of the reasons for its origins, means that including a larger percentage of women as professional leaders will have positive impacts on advancing the agenda for occupational safety and health. In the final report, recommendations included:

- Strengthening data collection,
- expanding research work and surveys on gender-based violence and its root causes,
- access to redress for harm from discrimination
- unpaid women's labor require high priority attention.

Administrative data systems need to be strengthened, and data and survey results made available for the public. Governments can work to fill this gap.

### Where Next?

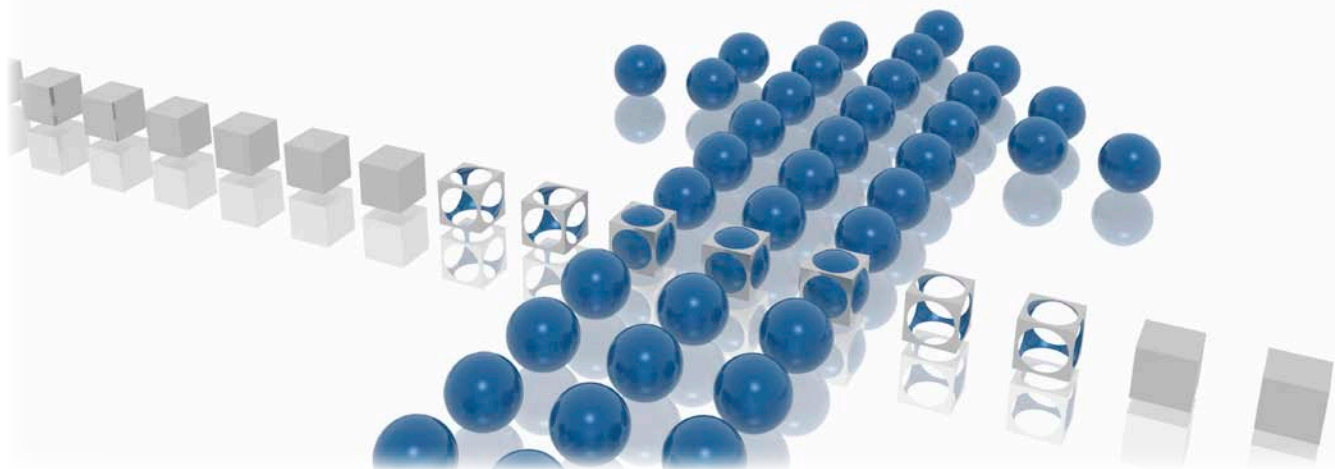
The obvious next agenda item was the question of whether there is a clear and strategically manageable way forward. Women and men must work together to overcome stereotypes and proactively seek opportunity to provide inquisitive young ladies with educational

advancement, even in the face of cultural opposition in the workplace, in academia or at home.

Since so much remains to be done regarding the implementation of the roadmap and pathway set forth in Beijing twenty years ago, there are no immediate plans for a fifth UN world conference on women, since no new document is needed. Yet, a small group meeting at the NGO forum in New York for the commission on the status of women headed by Dr Jean Shinoda Bolen suggested the next stop on the UN World Conference path towards women's equality should be India. ■

**Women and men must work together to overcome stereotypes and proactively seek opportunity to provide inquisitive young ladies with educational advancement, even in the face of cultural opposition in the workplace, in academia or at home.**

**Dr. Ilise L Feitshans, J.D., ScM, DIR**, is a bilingual lawyer with a M.S. in Public Health from Johns Hopkins University. She has written the chapter "Occupational Health as a Human right" for the ILO Encyclopaedia, and is the author of the treatise "Designing an Effective OSHA Compliance Program," which addresses law and occupational medicine. Her articles and press releases have been published in many nations. Her forthcoming book, *Forecasting Nano Law*, will offer basic information and a policy toolkit in plain language for stakeholders.



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## A Word to the WISE • WISE Common Interest Group

### Officers

#### Administrator

Jennifer S. Zipeto, CSP  
jennifer.zipeto@disney.com

#### Assistant Administrator

Monique Parker  
monique.parker@owenscorn  
ing.com

#### Content Coordinator

Heather J. Earl, CSP, CPEA  
heather.earl@disney.com

*A Word to the WISE* is a publication of ASSE's Women in Safety Engineering Common Interest Group, 520 N. Northwest Highway, Park Ridge, IL 60068, and is distributed free of charge to members of the Women in Safety Engineering Common Interest Group. The opinions expressed in articles herein are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of ASSE. Technical accuracy is the responsibility of the author(s). Send address changes to the mailing address above; via fax to (847) 768-3434; or via e-mail to customerservice@asse.org.



### ASSE Staff

#### Director, Practice & Standards

Tim Fisher  
tfisher@asse.org

#### Communications Team

Tina Angley  
Cathy Baker  
Brendan Hilliard  
Siobhan Lally  
Tim Shaunnessey  
Sue Trebswether  
COPSpublications@asse.org