

Talk of Campus

Compiled by Dawn Bowman and Gail Gaboda

Focus on Women

This fall, the world avidly watched when women were the focal point of attention during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

What the world didn't know was that several Grinnell students and professors helped plan the conference's agenda, and a Grinnell professor attended the NonGovernmental Organizations forum in Huairou, China—which occurred at the same time as the Beijing conference.

Associate Professor of Economics Janet Seiz attended the NGO forum this fall through her involvement in the International Association for Feminist Economics.



Seiz



Broe

The NGO forum, which was held about 30 miles away from Beijing, focused on sharing information among members of activist groups, professional organizations, humanitarian groups, and other associations that are not affiliated with the government.

Seiz was scheduled to present a paper on feminist economic theory and the household, but arrived too late to do so because of a

problem obtaining her visa. "Thousands of people couldn't attend at all" because they were denied visas, she says.

She chaired a panel titled "Women, Welfare, and the State: North and South Perspectives." Seiz says this issue is important because "in every part of the world, under the guise of economic reform, governments are reducing their role in education, health care, child care, income support, and other social services. In the United States we call it 'cutting the budget deficit.' In Latin America, Africa, and Asia they call it 'structural adjustment,' and in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe it's associated with the transition from communism to capitalism."

Seiz says that it is women, especially single mothers, who must bear the brunt of these cutbacks in services. The purpose of the panel was to enable women from different regions to compare their experiences, and to formulate strategies for persuading governments to deal with economic problems in ways that don't place such high burdens on women.

It was "an incredible feeling of solidarity to be joining voices with women from every part of the world," Seiz says. Although a lot was accomplished at the conference, "the real work is still ahead. Women's groups and individuals have to pressure their governments into following through with the principals they declared they were committed to at the U.N. conference. The situation is urgent, and it is made more difficult by the rise of conservative and fundamentalist antifeminist forces around the world."

Mary Lynn Broe, director of Noun Program in Women's Studies and Louise R. Noun Professor of Women's Studies and English, last year was involved in preliminary work for the Beijing conference. In October 1994 she helped organize a workshop on women's education as part of "Priorities '95: Anticipating the U.N.

World Conference on Women." The recommendations made at this preliminary conference were included in the Beijing U.S. National Report and Platform for Action.

The workshop, "From Intervention to Empowerment," looked at education as an inclusive issue for all women, not just those in higher education. "We wanted to involve women at all levels," Broe says. "Job-related issues such as minimum wage, problems in getting a GED, literacy training, and health and safety are extremely important for all women."

In planning the workshop, Broe worked closely with Grinnell students who were involved in literacy training in communities with a high immigrant population. The students interviewed non-English speaking women who worked at a nearby meat processing plant. These women often were working under unsafe conditions, but lacked English skills to communicate their concerns to management. She says these workers needed literacy as a tool so that they could obtain safe working conditions, a fair wage, and better hours.

Cynthia Lewis, instructor of education, and a colleague from the University of Iowa also participated in developing recommendations for women's education to be included in the Beijing Platform for Action. At the Iowa conference last year, they presented their work on a family/adult literacy project they directed for Latina/Latino residents of a rural Iowa town. The women in the study were interested in using literacy to promote change for their children at school, as well as to connect to their church, their neighborhood, and the entire community.

Students involved in the Iowa planning conference were Mary Benjamins '95 and Beth Prullage '94. They discussed experiences they encountered during internships sponsored by the Noun program.