

# ‘Once and For All’: The Fourth UN World Conference on Women and the Institutionalisation of Women’s Human Rights in American Foreign Policy

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Though the slogan predates the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, ‘women’s rights are human rights’ has become inextricably linked to US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton’s keynote address at the 1995 Conference in Beijing. The speech turned a line socialised by transnational feminist organisers into a State Department mantra with long-lasting policy ripples still felt today. This article uses new sources from the Office of the First Lady to examine the intra-departmental dynamics, policy architecture and domestic political considerations that shaped the content of the speech and the Clinton Administration’s conception of women’s rights as human rights. Early documents show that a focus on human rights was not inevitable, as other policy areas were better developed with more public support. But fear of rollback from previous international standards, external pressures from civil society, a desire to link foreign policy with domestic political aims and ultimately a strong backlash to American participation at the Conference on the basis of China’s human rights record all elevated women’s human rights as a US delegation priority.

When First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton crossed the plenary stage at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, her deputy chief of staff and speechwriter held their breaths in the wings, ‘more nervous than [words] can describe’.<sup>1</sup> Only a handful of people had seen the text of the speech, about to be read to representatives from nearly every country in the world and broadcast into hundreds of thousands of homes. More than ten minutes in, Clinton had only gotten a smattering of applause, but as her rhythm picked up, so did the response. ‘It is time for us to say, and the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights’, she paused as the crowd gave her its first shouts, then began a litany of gendered abuses – infanticide, forced abortion, conflict-related sexual violence, trafficking – naming each a ‘violation of *human rights*’.<sup>2</sup> The list

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culminated in a line that would take on a life of its own: 'If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, once and for all'.

Today, the slogan 'women's rights are human rights' features on mugs, posters, stationary, designer t-shirts and handmade signs at protest marches worldwide. But in 1995, it was relatively new – a rallying cry first circulated by grassroots women's rights groups and taken up by non-governmental organisation (NGO) coalitions in the early 1990s, most visibly at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna where a concerted campaign succeeded in getting the human rights of women acknowledged as 'an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights'.<sup>3</sup> For the phrase to be repeated by the First Lady of the United States on a global stage represented not only a success for feminists who had socialised the words, but a profound shift in how US foreign policy accounted for women. How did the now-iconic line make it into the speech in the first place? When conference preparations started, human rights took a back seat to issues like women's economic empowerment or education, but by the time the speech draft took shape in the weeks before the conference, women's human rights were the central rhetorical pillar. This change was in part the result of external pressure from civil society, but also internal dynamics within the executive branch that forced bureaucrats to reconsider where women's rights fit in the diplomatic agenda.

Though historians typically identify the 1970s as the era when human rights emerged as an American foreign relations priority, it was not until preparation for the Beijing Conference in the 1990s that US foreign policy institutions began to extend the concept of human rights to include issues like domestic violence or reproductive freedom, which were previously seen as 'something else'.<sup>4</sup> The growing importance of gender equality as a foreign policy priority in the United States today calls for greater attention to the bureaucratic history of this agenda. How women's rights were understood by diplomatic actors, how they intersected with other domestic and foreign policy agendas, how they shaped bilateral relations and how they evolved rhetorically are all understudied questions. This paper will examine how the concept of women's human rights moved through diplomatic and political preparations for the Beijing Conference and the considerations that shaped the speechwriting process. It draws on new sources from the papers of Melanne Verveer, Clinton's deputy chief of staff during conference preparations, as well as documents from the Clinton Presidential Library, contemporary press and oral histories that provide a window into the intra-departmental processes that first elevated women's human rights as a US foreign policy issue.

## Women's human rights as a US foreign policy concern

The concept of women's human rights did not emerge when it was named by the US Government. Indeed, it was due to decades of global organising that the issue was elevated to a level of political salience that it could be included in the First Lady's speech. Recent historical attention to these efforts in the post-war era shows much of it was driven by women in the global south, using platforms like the United Nations (UN) to demand the inclusion of women in a succession of foundational human rights conventions.<sup>5</sup> American women were involved with such efforts from the start, but their contributions often surfaced disputes over the nature of women's human rights, shaped by Cold War politics. Disagreements between camps variously termed 'egalitarian' versus 'social' feminists, or 'liberal equality' versus 'full rights' feminists – and a governmental divide between civil and political rights prioritised by the United States versus social and economic rights championed by the Soviet Union – came to a head in multilateral spaces, whether the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the International Labor Organization or the four UN World Conferences on Women hosted between 1975 and 1995.<sup>6</sup> Work by Jocelyn Olcott and Lisa Levenstein on the 1975 Mexico City Conference and the 1995 Beijing Conference explores tensions between women on either side of Cold War alliances, as well as between grassroots activists and formal state delegations.<sup>7</sup> However, historical scholarship on this rights debate has typically focused on changing dynamics in the global women's movement, the

adoption of new activist strategies and technologies, and the relationship between feminists working inside and outside government.<sup>8</sup> As Helen McCarthy points out, such accounts give less attention to state actors and as a result miss 'what might be called the "diplomatic history" of the global women's rights agenda'.<sup>9</sup>

By the time of the Beijing Conference, these transnational feminist campaigns had succeeded in socialising the idea of women's human rights to the extent that it 'permeated debates and delegates' speeches'.<sup>10</sup> But its prominence at the UN did not necessarily translate to diplomatic policy, especially in the United States where women's rights was institutionally and rhetorically separate from more established attention to human rights. Historians of human rights in US foreign policy recognise several possible origins of American interest, but generally point to the mid-1970s as the moment where human rights were institutionalised in the country's diplomacy. Scholars like Barbara Keys, Mark Bradley, Sarah B. Snyder and Samuel Moyn explore various reasons for this, including the rise of recently founded human rights NGOs, multilateral pressure from newly independent states, a willing president, growing Congressional interest and national guilt in the wake of the Vietnam War.<sup>11</sup> But the recognition of women's rights by foreign policy actors does not follow the same periodisation. Despite small concessions in the 1970s, it is not until the 1990s that the human rights mechanisms in US policy infrastructure expanded to address gendered rights violations.

The history of women's human rights in US foreign policy then falls between these two larger bodies of historical scholarship on human rights policy and multilateral engagement on women's rights. Two notable exceptions to this dual neglect are books by Kelly Shannon and Karen Garner. Shannon tracks how women's human rights emerged as a policy priority in US relations with the Islamic world, focusing on the Clinton and Bush Administrations and rhetoric of women's human rights in bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Garner gives an overview of gender and foreign policy during the Clinton Administration; among other gender equality efforts, the book shows how the emerging norm of women's human rights was expressed by the executive branch.<sup>13</sup> Both of these books lay out important research agendas, but even as new historical work on the 1990s revisits US foreign policy during the post-Cold War era, few other historians have engaged with the questions they put forward. Garner and Shannon both uncover the interaction between feminists inside and outside the state and the power of civil society actors to slowly alter foreign policy priorities. This paper turns instead to intra-departmental dynamics and how bureaucrats within the federal agencies and White House reacted to external pressures coming from civil society and opposition politicians. By looking more closely at memos, reports and meeting notes surrounding the diplomatic and speechwriting process leading up to the Beijing Conference, it reveals how departmental architecture, consultants, domestic political considerations and input from other areas of the executive branch both allowed and constrained the adoption of the 'women's rights are human rights' slogan at the highest levels of government.

## Human rights and women's issues in foreign policy architecture

By 1995, both human rights and women's issues were established areas within American foreign policy machinery, but they had largely evolved separately. President Carter first created a Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department in 1977, and new legislation from Congress during the same period improved human rights reporting and demanded greater accountability for foreign assistance, making human rights an explicit policy consideration for the first time. From the start, the definition of human rights was highly contested, and in practice US policy efforts tended to focus on what Keys calls 'integrity-of-the-person' rights, like freedom from torture and arbitrary detention, which were palatable to both liberals and right-wing anti-communist politicians.<sup>14</sup> These 'public' rights, concerned with government violations, became foundational to foreign policy rhetoric. Even President Reagan, who showed every inclination to ignore the previous administration's human rights notions, invoked the concept, though shifted its focus to democracy promotion.<sup>15</sup> The end of

the Cold War suggested new possibilities for a human rights-driven foreign policy. As a candidate, Bill Clinton criticised President Bush over his handling of human rights abuses in Iraq, Serbia, China and Haiti, and in the early months of Clinton's presidency his administration 'cleaned shop', replacing Bush-era diplomats with a series of political appointees holding strong human rights credentials.<sup>16</sup> Many were drawn from the Carter Administration's foreign policy team, and the combination of personnel and rhetoric gestured to a return to the heyday of human rights in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

But human rights architecture was not integrated with the small offices devoted to women's issues. Though attention to women's rights had grown since the 1970s, it was neither a rhetorical nor a practical bedrock of US foreign policy. Possibly the greatest interest in women's rights came through multilateral forums. Women's rights was identified as 'a very lively and prize-worthy propaganda vehicle' at the UN as early as the 1940s, and UN World Conferences on Women in Mexico City, Copenhagen and Nairobi in 1975–85 served as strategic platforms to articulate competing visions of women's equality during the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> Preparations for these convenings also offered the chance for feminist activists to harness global attention to pressure their governments to make institutional changes.<sup>19</sup> In the United States, this contributed to the adoption of the 1973 Percy Amendment, which required US bilateral aid to give 'particular attention to [...] activities which tend to integrate women into the national economies of foreign countries' – the first legislation anywhere in the world that linked women and development in overseas aid – and a brand new Women in Development Office (WID) in 1974.<sup>20</sup> The State Department implemented an NGO recommendation to create a new Office for International Women's Programs in 1976, and by 1980 had begun to include a short paragraph about the legal status of women in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.<sup>21</sup> The Reagan and Bush Administrations did little to advance these small steps and the 'women's issues' and 'human rights' agendas in US foreign policy remained institutionally distinct – with the former 'relegated to the development assistance portfolio'.<sup>22</sup> Diplomat Prudence Bushnell, for instance, recalled her first human rights report in 1982 'did not include domestic violence because it was considered a cultural issue'.<sup>23</sup>

For the Clinton Administration, the Beijing Conference offered a chance to implement its vision of a values-based foreign policy. It was the culmination of a spate of UN-sponsored meetings in the 1990s – the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen – that senior actors in the Clinton Administration viewed 'as a way to effect broad change', delivering on the President Clinton's campaign promises.<sup>24</sup> The conference also offered another chance for feminist actors to capitalise on renewed attention to global women's issues, during a presidential administration that was friendly to expanding institutional resources for women. The creation of a new Office of International Women's Issues within the State Department in 1994 shows the Clinton Administration's 'women's agenda' extended into the foreign policy realm. In contrast to the Reagan Administration, the Clinton White House 'was serious about women', Bushnell recalled. 'Prep for the Beijing Women's Conference had started and people were recognizing a shift'.<sup>25</sup> However, conference proponents would realise that the human rights architecture remained limited to 'public' rights, and typically did not recognise the violations that disproportionately affected women and often occurred in the private sphere such as sexual assault, forced sterilisation or harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage.

### **'It's going to be a busy time'**

The piecemeal institutional architecture for women's issues and human rights was reflected in the organisational structure tasked with preparing the American delegation to Beijing. The Clinton Administration had a dual responsibility of negotiating the diplomatic agreement that participating states would sign on to – the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – and articulating its 'women's agenda' through public remarks, domestic outreach, and naming an official delegation. The

former was the purview of the State Department, while White House personnel led more public-facing efforts including drafting the First Lady's speeches. However, the diplomatic and political workstreams were inextricably linked, and an abundance of memos, faxes and circulars testify that at the level of day-to-day operations the two were difficult to disentangle. Still, each faced different sets of constraints and incentives, and it is useful to examine how the concept of 'women's rights as human rights' evolved in the context of diplomatic negotiations, as well as in the more politically sensitive atmosphere of the White House. Ultimately, the central place women's human rights took in the First Lady's speech depended on both.

US Representative to the UN Commission on the Status of Women Arvonne Fraser, former WID Director and herself a veteran of the 1975 and 1980 World Conferences on Women, drafted a recommendations memo more than a year and a half ahead of the Beijing Conference. She outlined the 'intense preparation' required – ten regional convenings across the United States, five international preparatory meetings (PrepComs), a public outreach and media strategy and liaising with Congress, NGOs and the White House – and warned it would require creating a fully staffed secretariat. 'It's going to be a busy time'.<sup>26</sup> In order to manage the complicated interagency process, the State Department created a Global Conference Secretariat, housed in the Department of Global Affairs headed by foreign service officer Theresa Loar. Loar had worked her way up the ranks after joining the Foreign Service in 1986, and though she had minimal experience on gender issues, her insider position was a valuable asset when she became the 'switching gear' within the State Department. With only four full-time staff and \$250,000, the Secretariat was also responsible for coordinating US participation in the 1994 Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, though the bulk of its efforts were focused on Beijing.<sup>27</sup> It coordinated a task force that included members from across the State Department as well as representatives from a dozen other federal agencies that would advise on readying an American negotiating position for the text of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>28</sup> The US delegation to the PrepCom meetings was chaired by Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright, a Clinton recruit from the Carter Administration's National Security Council whose academic career focused on human rights in Eastern Europe. Albright's human rights credentials were strong, and she had a reputation for advancing women in international affairs, directing her university's women in foreign service programme and inaugurating an informal group of women diplomats at the UN.

Even before the formal creation of the Secretariat, State Department officials were already communicating with White House staff. A memo from the State Department in April 1994 alerted the First Lady's office to 'a number of issues relating to the [Conference] which, sooner or later, will stoke the interest of the White House'.<sup>29</sup> By May, the White House, USUN office and State Department were all being 'hit hard' on the question of US participation in and support for Beijing.<sup>30</sup> Feminists reached out wanting a robust American presence, a progressive Platform of Action, or a seat on the national delegation.<sup>31</sup> Critics cautioned that the conference's radical agenda would undermine family values.<sup>32</sup> Journalists asked how it would inform the US–China relationship. Given expectations that Hillary Clinton might attend, responsibility for Beijing-related issues fell largely to the Office of the First Lady. Other executive branch entities like the National Security Council would take a keener interest as the conference increasingly looked like it could be a political liability.

## **'With respect to our goals, we want to promote and protect the human rights of women'**

The diplomatic focus on women's human rights at Beijing was by no means pre-ordained. Compared with issues like economic empowerment, political participation and violence against women it lacked a robust policy framework. Ensuring continuity from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna – where 'the extraordinary success of efforts by women's rights activists worldwide' ensured human rights violations against women made it into the final Declaration – put human rights on the

table, but at first it took a back seat to other policy priorities.<sup>33</sup> A June 1994 meeting of experts from the Economic Commission for Europe reviewed the draft regional platform for Beijing and noted with concern ‘insufficient promotion and realization of the human rights of women’, adding ‘women’s human rights’ to the agenda for the European and North American Regional PrepCom in October 1994.<sup>34</sup> As the State Department worked on US contributions to the platform, human rights was one of the least clear goals. An early draft position paper on ‘human rights’ shows how the task force was grappling with the rhetorical integration of women’s rights and human rights, as well as its policy implications. A series of half-formed bullet points asked:

- can we expand on the Vienna Declaration?
- women’s human rights (integral and indivisible parts of universal human rights (?))
- is violence against women a violation of their human rights or a violation of their enjoyment of their human rights?<sup>35</sup>

The same ambivalence was reflected at the multilateral level. As late as May, the draft Platform of Action still included extensive bracketed language on human rights – areas states had not been able to agree on during the UN PrepCom. The ‘human rights’ category included both unresolved questions of terminology – ‘equity/equality’ and ‘universal/universally recognized/international/internationally recognized’ – and content, with everything from early marriage, economic rights, trafficking and forced pregnancy to indigenous rights and religious extremism still up for debate.<sup>36</sup>

The issue grew increasingly important on the diplomatic agenda in the face of conservative pushback and a response from American feminists. Actors including the Vatican, some Islamic governments and right-wing domestic pressure groups re-opened women’s human rights issues that had already been decided at recent UN conferences, such as the expansion of reproductive rights.<sup>37</sup> Feminists in and outside government agreed with US Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights Geraldine Ferraro, who warned in a *New York Times* op-ed, ‘we cannot take a chance that the world will back away from the agreements reached at Cairo and Vienna’.<sup>38</sup> As Garner and Levenstein examine in more depth, American women’s activists were already mobilised around women’s human rights by 1995 having joined forces with global colleagues at previous UN conferences.<sup>39</sup> They had been pushing the United States to take on a larger role at Beijing since the conference was announced, and State Department preparation gave them an avenue to be heard.<sup>40</sup> Past World Conferences on Women offered a relatively rare pathway for widespread civil society engagement with US foreign policy. Ahead of the 1980 Copenhagen conference for instance, more than 4,000 people attended outreach events to discuss strategies for advancing the status of women globally.<sup>41</sup> In advance of Beijing, the State Department held a series of NGO open meetings in Washington, while the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor took the lead convening ten regional meetings across the country to gather input and explain the conference agenda.<sup>42</sup> In addition to these official convenings, Global Secretariat staff and delegation members crisscrossed the country to participate in outreach meetings hosted by women’s clubs and universities – calendars show them visiting three to four states each week.<sup>43</sup>

These opportunities for direct engagement responded to ‘a tremendous, unprecedented interest in Americans in this conference’.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, eight thousand American women travelled to China to attend the NGO Forum, representing ‘nearly every conceivable feminist issue and identity group’.<sup>45</sup> Many of these groups were actively lobbying the State Department and White House to ensure their issues were taken up by the national delegation. A 1994 memo to the Office of the First Lady notes some of the most prominent: the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), founded by former Congresswoman and feminist Bella Abzug, which had built up a major lobbying presence at the UN; another group described as ‘senior’ women, part of longstanding organisations like the American Association of University Women whose international activism dated back to the inter-war era; international organisations focused on women’s development abroad but headquartered in the United States; and lastly feminist activists who viewed Beijing as an organising opportunity to lobby

on domestic policy issues like ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and passing the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>46</sup> Most of these actors were also part of the transnational networks that had circulated the concept and rhetoric of women's human rights on the multilateral stage, and could now use the regional meetings, NGO open meetings, and direct lobbying to advocate for the US government to prioritise women's rights as human rights.<sup>47</sup> By the summer of 1995, talking points for the delegation members listed 'human rights of women' as the number one issue on which 'the US will provide leadership'.<sup>48</sup> A July *démarche* request sent to all US diplomatic posts instructed embassies to approach host governments about the resolving bracketed language about human rights, emphasising 'the US believes that the human rights language in the document should build on Vienna'.<sup>49</sup> The priority was reflected in public messaging and outreach as well. 'First, with respect to our goals, we want to promote and protect the human rights of women', noted Ambassador Albright at a State Department briefing in August, before listing issues like health care, economic empowerment, and education.<sup>50</sup>

### **'More research needed'**

The White House faced a different calculus on the issue of women's human rights, cognizant of the possible political consequences for re-election and interested in tying the Conference to its domestic 'women's agenda'. Preparation for the conference was headquartered in the Office of the First Lady and managed by Clinton's Deputy Chief of Staff Verveer, who was in constant contact with Loar and the State Department Secretariat. Verveer, a friend of the Clintons from before the White House years, had previously worked at a series of progressive policy shops – including Common Cause, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities and People for the American Way – focused on domestic civil liberties and institutional reform. Her experience underscored the prominent policy role the First Lady's Office took on for the Administration. Hillary Clinton had recently managed the political effort to pass National Healthcare Reform and when the bill – dubbed 'Hillarycare' by opponents – failed in 1994, Beijing offered a chance to pivot to a global stage after the political blow.<sup>51</sup> Though Clinton's international portfolio had been minimal, advocating for women and families had been a central thread of her career since her first job at the Children's Defense Fund, and her earlier work had focused on issues like healthcare, education and microdevelopment on a national level. In 1995, she undertook two solo trips, one to the Social Development Summit in Copenhagen and one through South Asia, during which she gave major speeches centred on women and girls in development and education. According to Verveer, they showed her the possibility of using the platform to the First Lady to advance global gender equality.<sup>52</sup> And her office was under immense pressure because 'she was the place in the US government [...] where there was interest [in issues for women]'.<sup>53</sup> Clinton was determined to attend Beijing, but she and her staff recognised both the political benefits and dangers. They engaged pollsters, communications professionals and political analysts to help develop a message and strategy, 'very mindful that [...] the President's reelection campaign was literally around the corner' and that opponents to the conference were 'conjuring up the worst possible negative political repercussions'.<sup>54</sup> A memo from the progressive think tank Center for Policy Alternatives, concurred that the conference was not merely a diplomatic exercise, but a political opportunity that came at a critical time.<sup>55</sup> Beijing was a way to distinguish Clinton's foreign policy from previous republican administrations. 'The contrast between a Clinton Administration [...] and the Reagan era could not be more stark', it concluded, specifically comparing the 1985 Nairobi Conference delegation head – Maureen Reagan, the President's daughter – with the 'widely expected' possibility that in 1995 the American contingent would be led by the First Lady herself.<sup>56</sup>

Concerned with how the Conference would be perceived domestically, the White House worked to connect the Beijing agenda to issues American women faced at home, echoing President Clinton's 'signature concept' of emphasising the linkage of foreign and domestic policy.<sup>57</sup> The Conference could amplify existing initiatives like the Campaign for the Women's Economic Agenda (1994–1998)

and the fact that President Clinton had appointed record numbers of women to senior administration posts.<sup>58</sup> White House staff worked with the State Department to develop and fund outreach activities and a media strategy to refine messaging around the Conference and ensure it reached a broad audience, not only the usual suspects in the NGO community. They sought private funds for more extensive public engagement, employing the star power of the First Lady to court foundations and corporate donors.<sup>59</sup> These efforts did not at first reinforce a human rights message. The State Department commissioned a study by a communications firm to assess public opinion research on domestic and international issues of interest to women. The surveys found that Americans cared about education and health, but the report called human rights and legal rights a 'difficult area' and concluded 'more research needed here'.<sup>60</sup> Polling by political fundraising group EMILY's List sent to the First Lady's office showed women voters were overwhelmingly motivated by economic anxiety, even to the point of being hostile to international issues.<sup>61</sup> Focus groups conducted by the Center for Policy Alternatives came to a similar conclusion. The issues they found unified women were primarily economic: 'universal health care, equal pay, and flexibility to balance family and work', and 'a fourth area of personal safety'.<sup>62</sup> Human rights did not make the list.

Like the State Department, the White House was inundated with interest in Beijing from the American public, both feminist actors and their opponents. Preparations for Beijing faced many objections from interest groups within and outside government. As anticipated, the issues of reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights were heavily contested. Conservative commentators accused the authors of the Beijing Platform of trying to create five genders, condoning prostitution, undermining housewives, 'ignoring marriage', promoting 'homosexual lifestyles' and 'wanting the structure of society changed to make men and women the same'.<sup>63</sup> Some of these protests were simply partisan displeasure, but they meant the First Lady's speech would have to navigate a minefield of potential political triggers. Above all however, criticism came to focus on the issue of human rights in China, which, combined with pressures from the feminist NGO sector, pushed the issue of women's human rights into the spotlight.

### **'This Conference is about women and girls and not about China'**

The US–China relationship became increasingly difficult to ignore as conference preparations moved ahead. Already strained, bilateral relations had deteriorated under the Clinton Administration. In the first year of his presidency, Clinton supported legislation that made China's 'most favored nation' trade status conditional on human rights – namely releasing political prisoners, protecting Tibetan heritage, and complying with international agreements on prison labour – but later reversed the policy, angering human rights activists.<sup>64</sup> As late as May 1995, the State Department was still considering whether it would be feasible to move the conference site to a more palatable host country through diplomatic back-channelling.<sup>65</sup> The rocky relationship brought in more diplomatic and political players to an already crowded field determining whether and how the USA would engage at the Conference. Conference proponents had to answer to objections from longtime human rights supporters concerning China's treatment of religious minorities, women, political prisoners and Tibet, as well as those they considered bad faith actors using China as a political cudgel against the Clinton Administration, the UN and a progressive women's rights agenda.

Within the State Department, the China question meant a greater role for the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Desk (EAP). EAP staff viewed the Beijing conference through the lens of existing bilateral policy and advised that nothing should rock the boat. From their perspective, pressuring China on issues like NGO access to the conference put the US 'on treacherous policy, precedential and political grounds'.<sup>66</sup> The Conference Secretariat worried that a focus on great power politics could threaten support for the Women's Conference. 'Frankly, there was very little enthusiasm from anyone in our government [...] for U.S. participation in this conference' recalled Loar.<sup>67</sup> Talking points Loar drafted for a June meeting between Undersecretary of Global Affairs Tim Wirth and EAP Undersecretary

Winston Lord make the tensions clear: the first 'key point to make' for Wirth is 'ensure this Conference is not a bilateral US/China issue'.<sup>68</sup> More public challenges came from the political side, including heavy pressure from Congress. The House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights called a hearing on the Conference in July to debate whether the status of human rights in China should affect United States participation and the human rights content of the Platform of Action.<sup>69</sup> Some members believed the United States should boycott the Conference altogether, with particularly strong opposition from Republican committee members, who called what Representative Tom Lantos complained was a 'enormously lopsided' panel of anti-China witnesses and gave lengthy statements about religious freedoms and forced abortion.<sup>70</sup> Republican Congressman Gilman even introduced legislation that would tie the State Department's travel spending to stipulations that China allow greater NGO access – exactly what the EAP hoped to avoid.<sup>71</sup>

Many proponents of the Conference saw these sudden defences of human rights as a cynical ploy to undermine the progressive Beijing Platform. Where were the objections over human rights abuses in nations like Egypt or Brazil, who had hosted recent UN conferences? And why was the Women's Conference the time to take a stand against China, especially after the United States had recently renewed its 'most favored nation' trade privileges? Some tried to deflect criticisms – a May draft of delegate talking points made clear that 'this conference is about women and girls and not about China' – but the political pressure regarding China required a response.<sup>72</sup> It meant Conference supporters would have to make a human rights case for attending. 'Under any circumstances, one of the major USG goals for a women's conference would be women's human rights', Loar wrote in an update memo to Ambassador Albright, 'but the fact that this conference is in China gives special urgency and primacy to this goal'.<sup>73</sup> The public rhetoric surrounding the China question framed the issue of human rights as something distinct from the conference goals related to women and girls. The focus on 'integrity-of-the-person' rights violations meant even human rights offices dismissed women's issues as 'something else', and Loar remembered getting into 'a lot of discussion with the human rights folks over at the NSC on "how Mrs. Clinton really didn't understand human rights"'.<sup>74</sup> This made it even more important to show that women's rights were an integral part of the same agenda, not something less important that could be sacrificed in service of broader human rights concerns. Delegates emphasised how the conference could actually protect and promote human rights in China by socialising ideas of women's equality. 'It just does not make sense', Ambassador Albright concluded in a policy speech, 'in the name of human rights to boycott a conference that has, as a primary purpose, the promotion of human rights'.<sup>75</sup>

The sticking point of US–China relations also shaped the content of Clinton's speech in practical ways. By mid-August, just weeks before the opening session, the First Lady's trip was still unconfirmed. The 19 June arrest of American citizen Harry Wu in China had added fuel to the fire for those intent on limiting US participation in the Conference. During the Q&A of a public State Department briefing at the end of August, Albright and Wirth were peppered with questions about Wu, and reporters pressed the White House spokesperson daily.<sup>76</sup> On 25 August, Wu was sentenced by a Chinese court, then abruptly ejected from the country.<sup>77</sup> Within hours of his return to San Francisco, the White House issued a press statement that 'upon the recommendation of the President's national security team', the First Lady would be attending the Beijing Conference.<sup>78</sup> The decision came so late Clinton would not even have time to return to Washington from her vacation, instead her staff boarded a plane to Hawai'i to meet the First Lady en route to Beijing.

One outcome of this last-minute decision was that the First Lady's speech draft never went through the usual review process. The speech was only shared with a small number of key officials outside the First Lady's team. Lord and Stanley Roth, Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, provided edits, and Albright worked closely with Verveer and speechwriter Lissa Muscatine on the final draft.<sup>79</sup> Several of these officials later attested that the close hold allowed for more 'forceful and hardhitting' content. The plenary speech would be broadcast globally and had to successfully navigate contentious domestic and international political currents. Muscatine remembered thinking it would be 'the hardest speech we will ever do'.<sup>80</sup> Documents filed with the speech drafts in the Clinton

Presidential Library reflect the charged issues it had to address and a keen awareness of criticism coming from the left and right – a treatise on Chinese philosophy, Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Women*, news clippings on global 'family decline', the syllabus for a law school course on International & Comparative Law on the Rights of Women, and recent political polling.<sup>81</sup>

## Pushing the envelope

Some of the language from the speech had already been tested in Clinton's recent remarks. Many of the topics it covered were not new: she had represented the Administration at the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development earlier in the year with a speech that focused on women's economic empowerment and educational opportunities, though mentioned 'legal rights' only once and human rights not at all.<sup>82</sup> In the spring of 1995, she started to incorporate human rights language into her public remarks, aligning with the talking points that Albright and the US delegation were reading from with a rhetorical spin provided by Muscatine. At a briefing in April, Clinton insisted that women's issues 'are the bread-and-butter issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And they are human rights issues. Depriving women of basic education and health care, subjecting them to domestic violence without legal recourse—these are violations of human rights'.<sup>83</sup> The Beijing speech condensed that framework to a double version of the simpler activist slogan: 'women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights'. Even at the time, it was clear the words would resonate. As countries sparred over final wording of the official Beijing Declaration, the US delegation 'worked very hard [...] to get that phrase in', remembered a State Department negotiator.<sup>84</sup>

The human rights elements in the speech reflect the success of international feminist campaigns and the influence of domestic politics. To underscore the link between the two agendas, Clinton's speech centred on an enumeration of gendered rights violations not typically seen as part of the purview of human rights. They ranged from general abuses that affected women the world over – violence in the home and rape – to more specific harms associated with certain regions – dowry death and FGM – and included a practice linked mostly with China: forced abortion. The inclusion of forced abortion, a clear allusion to Chinese human rights practices, was a response to conservative critics. Combining the 'pro-life' agenda and anti-China rhetoric, forced abortion was consistently raised by Republican lawmakers in their rights-related opposition to the conference. Republican Congressman Smith released a statement just days before Clinton's speech to decry the practice and called on Clinton and Albright to 'use every public and private forum afforded by this conference and expose and seek to end the pervasive reliance by the govt of China on forced abortion'.<sup>85</sup> But Clinton framed it in a new way consistent with her own liberal politics and aligning with the Administration's domestic policy supporting abortion rights. Earlier notes for the speech framed the issue thus: 'You know I have always been + want to be a strong advocate for freedom of choice... But let me state emphatically- no forced abortions; no forced sterilizations'.<sup>86</sup> This also reflects new discourses of reproductive rights advanced by feminist actors and established at the Cairo Conference on Population – the broader remit of what counted as choice was a departure from previous US government policies that enthusiastically and uncritically supported family planning programmes in the global south despite association with coerced sterilisation.<sup>87</sup> The mention of FGM also reflected domestic interest fuelled by a sensationalist 1994 CNN broadcast on the practice, and a global anti-FGM movement that was beginning to frame the issue as a human rights one.<sup>88</sup>

Verveer and Muscatine credit the strength of the speech's central litany of rights violations to Clinton herself, and her insistence on not 'watering down' the language.<sup>89</sup> After writing through the night as they flew over the Pacific, they joined Albright to bring the draft to Clinton's office in the plane. Clinton remembers that Albright asked her 'what [she] was really trying to accomplish' with the speech.<sup>90</sup> She slid the draft back across the desk with new instructions: 'I want to push the envelope as far as we can on women's rights'.<sup>91</sup> The result was a speech that took direct shots at China's human rights practices – something pressure groups and Congressional leaders had wanted, but some

diplomats feared would destabilise precarious US–China bilateral relations – as well as those back in the United States. On the eve of the conference President Clinton gave a send-off speech that made women’s human rights a problem for the rest of the world. He described the Conference as ‘[talking] about a lot of things we take for granted here’. Like the First Lady, he tallied rights violations like infanticide and forced abortion but framed them as ‘something we can’t imagine in this country’.<sup>92</sup> In contrast, the First Lady’s speech made the point that comparable violations took place abroad and at home. Mirroring the White House efforts to link foreign and domestic policy and show how the Beijing agenda affected American women, Clinton explained the struggles of women in the USA: ‘As an American, I want to speak for those women in my own country, women who are raising children on the minimum wage, women who can’t afford health care or child care, women whose lives are threatened by violence, including violence in their own homes’.<sup>93</sup> Linking the human rights and women’s rights agendas and insisting on their universality helped build political will to advance women’s human rights as an American foreign policy priority.

## Bringing Beijing home

Clinton received overwhelming accolades. *The New York Times* called the speech ‘her finest moment in public life’, and it won praise from both sides of the partisan aisle – including many of the critics who had wanted her to boycott the conference in the first place.<sup>94</sup> Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, who had advised Clinton not to attend lest she validate Chinese leadership, read her retraction into the congressional record, specifically calling out the speech’s focus on human rights: ‘Indeed, Hillary Rodham Clinton’s statements are the strongest statements made on human rights in China, in Asia, and in the world by this administration to date’.<sup>95</sup> The Deputy Secretary of State wrote to Clinton’s office, ‘Your trip to Beijing was a ten-strike—good for women’s issues, good for US-China relations, good for Administration foreign policy in general’.<sup>96</sup> Now there was pressure to ‘Bring Beijing Home’. The Australian government had introduced a proposal to make Beijing ‘a conference of commitments’, echoing a feminist NGO campaign that urged states to not only sign on to the collective Platform of Action, but ‘further to specify [...] actions which they are prepared to commit to’.<sup>97</sup> Taking advantage of these demands for implementation, the goodwill accrued by the First Lady’s appearance, and the interagency work that had gone into preparing for the conference, the women who had helped lay the groundwork for the speech integrated women’s human rights more centrally into US policy.

At the highest levels, officials began to speak about ‘women’s human rights’ and quote Clinton’s speech in their remarks. Garner argues the speech ‘transformed government policy language’.<sup>98</sup> Delegation co-chair Albright was appointed Secretary of State the following year and promised ‘Advancing the status of women is not only a moral imperative; it is being actively integrated into the foreign policy of the USA. It is our mission’.<sup>99</sup> A number of practical changes accompanied this rhetorical shift.<sup>100</sup> President Clinton launched the President’s Interagency Council on Women (PICW) to ‘make sure that all the effort and good ideas [at Beijing] actually get implemented when we get back home’.<sup>101</sup> The PICW revived a mechanism that has existed in some form under Presidents Kennedy, Carter, Ford, and Nixon, and that feminists had been agitating to resurrect.<sup>102</sup> It helped link up and elevate work already being done on women and girls, bringing greater legitimacy to small offices that had been marginalised.<sup>103</sup> These offices provided an opening for feminist activists and NGOs to engage more directly in the policy process: women’s rights advocates began to receive invitations to the White House, and were solicited for their input by State Department officials.<sup>104</sup> The White House launched new programmes like the ‘Vital Voices’ initiative focused on women’s democratic participation, USAID committed to formally gender mainstreaming foreign assistance programming and earmarked tens of millions of dollars in new funding to women’s issues, the State Department formalised country reporting on women’s rights, and the Department of Justice made forced abortion and FGM grounds for political asylum.<sup>105</sup> These new considerations even shaped bilateral diplomacy,

such as the non-recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan on the grounds of women's rights violations.<sup>106</sup>

## Women's human rights after Beijing

The integration of women's rights into American foreign policy has at times been frustratingly slow, but the period immediately following the Beijing conference created offices, funds and policy guidance that have been difficult to dismantle. When Clinton was appointed Secretary of State in 2008, she further institutionalised attention to women's rights through what some dubbed the 'Hillary Doctrine' – elevating the Global Women's Issues office, integrating gender through department evaluation mechanisms, and initiating an interagency drafting process for a National Action Plan for Women, Peace & Security, a policy area that grew exponentially under the Obama and Trump Administrations.<sup>107</sup> 'Women's rights are human rights' remained a rhetorical touchstone for this policy agenda, still referenced today by senior Biden Administration officials.<sup>108</sup> The most recent strategic guidance on women's rights, the 2021 US National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, quotes the 1995 speech verbatim.<sup>109</sup> However, many feminist scholars and activists – including some of those who lobbied the US government to include women's human rights at Beijing – criticise efforts to integrate the agenda into these formal government mechanisms. Adopting certain women's rights issues while ignoring simultaneous calls to cut the military budget and end neoliberal economic policies risks watering down a transformative platform to fit existing US conceptions of individual civil and political rights, arguably insufficient to address the root causes of women's oppression.<sup>110</sup> Others go further and contend that claiming women's human rights in service US national interests enables imperialist military interventions, pointing to examples like First Lady Laura Bush's 2003 radio address on the eve of American invasion of Afghanistan as evidence of discursive manipulation.<sup>111</sup> More recently, the disastrous consequences for women in the wake of the 2021 American withdrawal from Afghanistan throw into sharp relief the gap between rhetoric and practice when it comes to advancing women's human rights.<sup>112</sup>

This dialogue underscores the ambiguities of the turn to women's human rights in US foreign policy, which echo in new debates over the rise of 'feminist foreign policy' worldwide. Greater attention to the origins of US prioritisation of women's human rights reveals the contingencies and possibilities of bringing a feminist agenda into government policy. Departmental incentives constrained what Clinton Administration officials could champion at the Beijing Conference, domestic politics shaped the framework they used to articulate their priorities, and historical understandings of women's rights affected how foreign policy agencies integrated gender. At the same time, the global women's movement introduced new vocabularies, and external civil society pressure allowed individual policy entrepreneurs to seize on moments of political will to 'push the envelope'. These factors precipitated an undeniable shift in US foreign policy that has led to far greater attention to and resources for women's human rights. Appreciating how such structural and political dynamics continue to act on policymakers can explain the mixed outcomes of more recent efforts to advance gender equity through US foreign policy institutions, as well as the possibilities of progressive change. Finally, tracing the evolution of women's human rights through US foreign policy architecture illuminates pathways that do not necessarily parallel broader human rights policy. Without specific attentiveness to gender politics, historical analysis will continue to misunderstand a factor that has become increasingly salient to US foreign policy over the past three decades.

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