

Changing Women Challenging the World: Five Years After Beijing

The closer we look at the issues, the more evident their complexity and inescapable their linkages: education to violence to child marriage, health, nutrition, sexual exploitation, and all of these to economic and social disparities.” It was Carol Bellamy, executive director of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), speaking in 1995 for and about the girl-child. Five years later, her voice still resonates—and far beyond girl-children’s concerns.

In the 21st century, have the issues become less complex, the linkages more obvious? How have women and girl-children changed, or have been changed by, a world of economic and social disparities? Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it is time to take a closer look at the issues.

The Platform, by far the most comprehensive plan for gender equality and equity, was the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing five years ago in September. The conference itself is the largest major UN gathering ever held, attended by a total 17,000 government delegates, NGO representatives, UN officials and media practitioners. The parallel NGO Forum attracted 30,000 women from around the world.

Adopted by all 189 countries in attendance, the Platform is considered a “framework” for eradicating discrimination against women, improving their social, economic and political status, and mainstreaming gender in development at the local, national and international levels.

The review of governments’ compliance with the Platform, called “BPFA+5,” governments is designed to hasten full implementation of the action plan.

Women’s organisations have been gearing up for this review since two years back. They have submitted their alternative reports that would supplement, affirm or belie the states’ official appraisal of compliance. They have set up various networks for updates, in-

formation exchange and real-time discussions. They have been doing what they do best—bringing the day-to-day problems women face, such as the lack of potable water in their communities, to the fore so that this high-power review becomes a relevant,

sincere attempt to improve women’s lives the world over.

An improvement indeed the review should aim for. In the two preparatory sessions for the BPFA+5 convened by the UN CSW in March of 1999 and 2000, to be sure, governments pledged there would be no renegotiation or dilution of the Platform, and affirmed their commitment to implementing this. Participating NGOs, however, have been clear about their dissatisfaction with the pace of change. Prof. Pam Rajput of the Asia-Pacific Women’s Watch coalition of women’s NGOs lamented governments’ “low level of political will” to enforce gender equality.

The obstacles were also identified during the preparatory meetings:

- the need for more resources to support implementation
- the impact on women of structural adjustment programmes and the resulting decline in resources allocated to social services on women
- the social, cultural and political cost of globalisation resulting in increased gender disparities in wages and working conditions
- women’s minimal involvement in science and technology
- the devastation of armed conflict and internal displacement
- the extent of violence against women
- the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its effect on women and girls

The emerging issues women grapple with today were also defined: globalisation, the fundamentalist backlash, mental health, elderly women, racism and sexuality.



A Scoreboard:

Are women better off today?

One Step Forward: Accomplishments

To be sure, the change in women's status at home and in society, the world over, has been remarkable. Governments have begun to focus policy on gender differences and disparities in various areas including basic education and health services. Several countries have focused on establishing social safety net programmes aiming to increase the income of women or improve their education, health and nutritional status. Female-headed households have received attention through various allowance schemes and improvements in the social security system. Some countries have adopted policies including a quota system to increase women's equal participation in the different levels of political and economic decision-making.

- **UGANDA.** A gender perspective has been incorporated into the National Poverty Eradication Action Plan to eradicate mass poverty by 2017.
- **SENEGAL.** Gender training has been conducted among senior decision-makers.
- **MADAGASCAR.** An evaluation of the impact of ongoing projects on women is regularly undertaken.
- **DENMARK.** Development assistance policy has adopted gender-specific poverty reduction strategies as a specific goal.
- **MEXICO.** The programme PROGRESA, under the Ministry of Social Development, has the widest range of interventions in employment, education, and health offered to women in poverty. The programme also provides training in managerial skills, self-administration and leadership to better equip women in their livelihood ventures.
- **ARGENTINA, GHANA, INDONESIA, SEYCHELLES.** Legal action to ensure equal access to free and compulsory education for up to 10 years has been taken.
- **NEPAL.** Scholarships in basic education are available for girls from poor families or rural areas.
- **VENEZUELA, PERU.** Laws on women's right to education including a ban on expelling pregnant students have been passed.
- **INDIA.** Girls with no access to formal schooling can rely on an expanded non-formal education system under which girls-only centres get 90 percent assistance from the central government.

- **GREECE.** The first framework to identify eligibility for social security benefits designed for female-headed households has been established.
- **IRAN, JAPAN.** Governments have allocated funds to develop special programmes for rural female-headed households.
- **FINLAND.** Government has established a female quota of 40/60 in public agencies.
- **GHANA.** Parliament follows a 40 percent quota for women.

- **ITALY, AUSTRIA.** A 20 to 40 percent quota for women's membership in certain political parties is in place.

Two Steps Back: Failures and Omissions

Worldwide, according to the UN, millions of women still live in poverty, 600,000 die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes every year, and 600 million cannot read or write. At least one in three women and girls has been beaten or subjected to

The Necessary Mechanisms: *How sincere are governments?*

The "Institutional Arrangements" section of the Platform spells out the national, regional and international mechanisms for implementation of the obligations specified in the Platform. This portion serves as the built-in accountability feature of the document. At the national level, these includes: (1) national strategies or plans of action, (2) effective national machineries for the advancement of women, and (3) the required resource and budget allocations. At the regional and international levels, all UN commissions and international institutions are expected to review and revise policies to ensure their investments and programmes benefit women.

So far, 118 countries that have adopted the Platform have drawn up national plans and drafts, blueprints for action to address the needs and priorities of women. *Mapping Progress: Assessing the Implementation of the Beijing Platform* by the Women's Environment and Development Organization also reports that:

- 77 countries have set up national offices to follow up on commitments made in Beijing, 36 of them with powers to initiate legislative actions
- 64 countries have enacted laws and adopted policy measures to address women's rights in the 12 critical areas of concern
- one-third of the 88 countries that responded to the *Mapping Progress* survey have increased their budgets for women's programmes since the Beijing conference

The "Financial Arrangements" portion, meanwhile, works as a measure of governments' sincerity in implementing the

women's agenda. According to the UN report "Update on the National Action Plans and Strategies for the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action" (January 1999), however, most action plans do not include budget proposals or indicate financing sources for the execution of their targets. Senegal's is one of the few exceptions since it includes a detailed budget of annual costs for 1997-2001.

- **JAMAICA.** On paper, the government, in association with other Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member states, has formulated a national action plan in cooperation. But in reality, the plan does not allocate resources or contain time-bound targets or benchmarks for measuring progress.

- **CROATIA.** The Committee for Equality is the BPFA-implementing body, but its role remains unclear. It has no executive power, no financial plans and resources, and no attempt to properly define equality or gender equality. Its chairwoman is alleged to have shown no interest in women's issues until recently. The members of the committee do not include a single professional to work specifically on women's issues.

- **NEW ZEALAND.** Here is a good example of a national action plan with teeth—including time-bound targets and benchmarks, rising budget (for research and other monitoring/evaluation tools), and permanent status for the primary agency for implementing the BPFA. This agency is the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which is a full department of state with its own chief executive.

gender abuse. Women and girls are also the most affected by armed conflict, comprising 80 percent of the world's 27 million refugees. They have also been the most victimised by the spread of HIV/AIDS. In addition, an estimated 20 million unsafe abortions are performed every year, resulting in the deaths of 70,000 women. Women continue to earn only 75 percent, or even less, of every dollar, euro or yen earned by men. Women are more commonly found in part-time work, in the informal sector, and among the unemployed and

underemployed. Women's work in subsistence farming and in family enterprises is ignored in conventional statistics such as GNP and GDP, and there are no social security, health or old age benefits attached to such work. Unfortunately, the most common and persistent forms of discrimination and alienation of women are rooted in cultural practices and norms that reduce women to childbearers and caregivers, and that governments have shown no intention or inclination to reverse—domestic abuse, rape, child and

forced marriages, genital mutilation, bride-price and dowry deaths, honor killings, acid attacks, even the Vatican's obstructionism regarding family planning and abortion.

Gender-based discrimination includes the most blatant forms such as sanctioned family violence and abuse (as these happen in the privacy of the home, out of the ambit of government).

A more subtle application of society's embedded discrimination against women is their vulnerability to layoffs in times of financial or business crisis. They are the "last hired and first fired." The thinking is that women are more dispensable as their earnings merely supplement the family income.

Citing religious law, several countries still allow the practice of polygamy, which is inherently discriminatory to women as it poses serious emotional and financial consequences on a woman and her dependents. A number of countries still do not grant parents equal status in guardianship, particularly when the parents are not married. The children of such unions also do not enjoy the same status in terms of maintenance and inheritance as those born in wedlock.

On owning and managing property, in some countries undergoing agrarian reform or redistribution of land among groups of different ethnic origins, the rights of women, regardless of marital status, to share such redistributed resources on equal terms with men are eroded by customs and traditions, including policy-setting and implementation bodies such as councils of elders that are typically dominated by men. Also, invariably, a higher value is attached to men's contribution to property acquired during marriage, while women's work such as raising children, caring for elderly relatives and discharging household duties is undercounted and diminished. Under this setup, should the marriage end, the woman receives a significantly lower share than her husband.

- Female genital mutilation is inescapable for girls in **Benin, Chad, Guinea and Yemen**.
- In **Turkey**, girls in orphanages and women in prisons, and sometimes even female tourists staying in hotels with male companions, have been subjected to virginity tests against their will.
- Immigration laws in **Bangladesh and Pakistan** discriminate against visa applications of the foreign spouses of their women because recognition of nationality is exclusively through the paternal line.
- Only 15 percent of divorced fathers in **Japan** pay child-support.
- Pregnant workers in **Australia** still experience unfair treatment at work including immediate dismissal, reduced work hours for

Is Your Money Where Your Mouth Is?

Trends in Budget Allocations for Women since 1995

COLOMBIA		No change in government allocation for implementation of the BPFA. Still 0.01 percent of total annual budget.
SLOVENIA		No change (since 1992). Still \$170,000 annually. [Amount not specified if in US dollars]
INDONESIA		No change.
ALBANIA		No change.
GUATEMALA		Down 60 percent.
THAILAND		Down 29 percent.
SWAZILAND		For the first time since the country gained independence in 1968, the government approved a specific budget for gender and women's issues (US\$40,000 annually).
ECUADOR		Up 60 percent. Women's budget is less than 1 percent of total government budget.
NAMIBIA		Up by over 50 percent. Now 11 percent of total annual budget.
NICARAGUA		Still no action plan.
CROATIA		Budget for implementing BPFA unknown.
NEW ZEALAND		Up 25 percent in 1997-98 from previous financial year. Annual budget for the Ministry of Women's Affairs is 0.03 percent of government budget (1997-98).

casual employees, and the bosses' and colleagues' touching of a woman's stomach without invitation.

- Women in **Bangladesh and India** are still victims of dowry-related killings.
- Women in **Tanzania** are still punished for not bearing children.
- Women in **Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia** must first obtain permission from a male relative before applying to leave the country.
- In 25 developing countries in **Asia, Sub-Saharan and North Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean**, men outnumber women at higher levels of education, at least 40 percent of women aged 15 to 49 work, although their employment does not reflect higher income levels. Very few women, moreover, hold professional, technical or managerial positions.
- Across the globe—in **Peru and Ethiopia**, as well as in **Syria and other Arab countries**, the law allows a rapist to escape trial if he marries his victim. In such cases, rape occurs three times: when the woman is raped, when she is married to the rapist, and when he inevitably divorces her after a few months.
- Girls as young as 12 are permitted to marry in **Colombia**, 14 in **Mexico** and 15 in **Tanzania**.

- The penal code in **Morocco** finds murder, injury and beating “excusable” if committed by a husband who catches his wife in an act of adultery.
- In **Sudan**, marriage is negotiated between the future groom and a Muslim guardian acting for the bride.
- In **Iran**, two women caught in bed together can be flogged, and if they are caught more than three times, they can be executed.



Women in Transition

Since 1995, the Women in Transition (WIT) initiative established by the Office of Transition Initiatives of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been delivering development resources to women. The project is part of a reconstruction following the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

More than one-third of all Rwandan households today are headed by women, most of whom are war widows or wives of husbands now in jail awaiting trial, accused of participating in the genocide. Women have only recently won the legal right to property, but even widows prepared to assert legal claims to their husbands' fields typically lack the tools, seeds and livestock needed to make a living.

The WIT initiative addresses such basic issues as food and shelter specifically for women. With a five-year budget of US\$5.2 million, the project has helped 92 communes and funded 1,645 projects. Home-building projects account for 40 percent of the budget. Microenterprise investments represent about 25 percent, benefiting 800 women's associations. The initiative has proven that support for women's concerns can bolster the growth of women's organisations. Nationally registered women's groups in Rwanda have increased from 13 in 1995 to 36 today.

No Better than a Junior Male

In February 1999, Zimbabwe's Supreme Court, deciding 5-0 on an inheritance dispute, ruled that “although the preference of males was discriminatory, it was not contrary to the anti-discriminatory clause in Zimbabwe's constitution because the provision did not forbid discrimination based on sex.” In finding Vennia Magaya incapable of inheriting the estate of her father, who had died without leaving a will, the decision overruled or challenged almost every law relating to women's rights in Zimbabwe. Although Zimbabwean laws and international treaties backed Ms. Magaya's claim, the court gave the estate to her half-brother.

The judges said “the nature of African society' relegates women to a lesser status, especially in the home. A woman should not be considered an adult within the family, according to the court, but only as a 'junior male.'” Daughters are excluded from inheriting from their fathers, according to the court, because they would not be able to look after their original family due to their commitment to their new (marital) family.

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Highlights of the Beijing Platform

- **Women's right to their bodies:** The Platform takes the Women's Convention a step further by asserting women's right to "have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."
- **Women's right to inherit:** In many societies, traditional and legal structures discriminate against women inheriting land and property. The Platform calls for a change in these structures by "enacting as appropriate, and enforcing legislation that guarantees equal rights to succession and ensures equal right to inherit, regardless of the sex of the child."
- **Review of laws on illegal abortion:** The Platform asks governments to "consider reviewing laws containing punitive measures against women who have undergone illegal abortion."

- **Role of the family:** The Platform points out the importance of the family as the basic unit of society and recognises the "social significance of maternity, motherhood and the role of parents in the family and in the upbringing of children." It moreover notes that maternity should not impede the full participation of women in society.
- **Culture and religion:** Traditional interpretations of religious texts often marginalise the role of women in society. According to the Platform, religion can "contribute to fulfilling women's and men's moral, ethical and

spiritual needs and to realising their potential in society."

- **Rape as war crime:** Rape, according to the Platform, is a war crime, and in some cases, an act of genocide. Those guilty of such a crime "must be punished."



From Equality to Empowerment

The Beijing Platform's forerunner is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (**Women's Convention**), adopted in 1979 and often referred to as the international Bill of Women's Rights. The Women's Convention, also called CEDAW, is significant in that it obliges states not only to prohibit violations of women's rights but also to "pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women." Governments are therefore to undertake a removal of the institutions, customs and practices that perpetuate the discrimination against women and their rights. It requires governments to take responsibility for acts of discrimination inflicted by a "person, organisation or enterprise," thus covering discrimination in the home.

The Women's Convention lays out in legally binding form the core precepts

in securing women's rights:

- formal recognition that all human rights and fundamental freedoms apply to women as they do to men
- prohibition of discrimination in the enjoyment of formally guaranteed rights and creation of equal opportunities for women to exercise all rights and freedoms
- identification and elimination of gender-specific obstacles to the equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms

A recent positive development, however, is the Optional Protocol, an addendum to the Women's Convention that allows for private individual women and women's groups to seek redress direct from the UN for any violation of their fundamental rights. As of December 1999, some 23 countries had signed this Optional Protocol, indicating serious intent to ratify it. It enters into force on ratification of 10 states.

Spunk and Substance: The NGOs as Drivers

In some countries—Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Senegal—governments have looked to NGOs as a resource in drafting key women’s policies and involved women’s activists with definite areas of specialisation and expertise in implementing and evaluating programmes.

There is wide disparity between governments’ and the NGO community’s estimation of their countries’ achievements in women’s empowerment and gender concerns. A number of women’s organisations and caucuses have noted how some governments are disposed to simply list existing laws, policies and programmes relating to women, without bothering about the substantive part of their commitments in the Platform.

Generally, NGOs have emphasised the negative consequences of globalisation on women, the importance of ensuring women’s human rights in all aspects, the protection of women from all forms of violence, the inclusion of women in peace and conflict

resolution efforts, ensuring women’s participation in politics and all decision-making processes, securing women’s health through a rights-based approach and a commitment by governments to mainstreaming gender and women in all policies and programmes.

• **CAMBODIA.** The government considers women’s reproductive health as a priority, but the national budget allocations belie this. In 1999 the Ministry of National Defense took 22.07 percent of the national budget, while the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs got a total of only 0.095 percent.

• **INDONESIA.** The country report states: “For Indonesia, the Women and Armed Conflict [as one of 12 critical areas of concern cited in the Beijing Declaration] is not thoroughly significant generally because for the past three decades Indonesia is already in [a] peaceful and stable condition.” But Indonesian soldiers did not exactly create “a

peaceful and stable condition” among the women of East Timor. A fact-finding mission organised in late 1999 heard first-hand testimonies of victims from Dili, Baucau, Venelale and Liquica, some of whom revealed how they were made sex slaves by members of the Indonesian army and militias. Rape, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, was also systematically used in Irian Jaya and Aceh to subdue ethnic populations agitating for autonomy and self-determination.

• **PHILIPPINES.** Since 1995, all government agencies have been mandated to allocate at least five percent of their total appropriations to programmes and projects that address “gender issues.” But in some agencies, the “Women’s Budget” has been spent on frivolous activities. These include ballroom dancing, bonsai classes, and setting up a drinking fountain. Travel expenses of top officials attending conferences abroad that have little to do with gender issues are also charged to the Women’s Budget.

• **TAJIKISTAN.** The government has adopted the National Plan of Action for improving the status of women for the period 1998-2005. It vowed to collect accurate statistics, coordinate with women’s crisis centres, and design criminal sanctions. But no funding has been allocated for such basic projects as setting up the crisis centres or for training social service providers.

The Asia-Pacific Verdict

Some advances, but many more setbacks

In taking stock, 500 women who attended the Asia-Pacific Regional NGO Symposium in Thailand in September 1999 arrived at the conclusion that despite some advances in some critical areas of concern, the women in the region remain basically inferior to men and always disadvantaged in terms of government attention.

- The **South Asia** report underscored the adverse impact of the Asian financial crisis on women’s socioeconomic conditions.
- The **Southeast Asia** report censured governments’ tendency to use the regional economic crisis as an excuse for their omissions to women and women’s empowerment.
- The **East Asia** report warned against rising militarism in the subregion and the results of such preoccupation with warfare



and defense, specifically the cutbacks in spending on women’s empowerment and children’s welfare.

- The **Central Asia** report revealed the common experience of poverty and unemployment; an aging population due to lower birthrates and the migration of youth; and women’s limited participation in social and community development.
- The **Pacific** report criticised states’ slow, if not hesitant, initiatives in strategic change including equal employment legislation and constitutional guarantees against sexual discrimination.