

**Expert Group Meeting on:
Beijing +25: Current context, emerging issues and prospects for gender equality and women's rights**

**Convened by UN-Women
New York City**

25-26 September 2019

CONCEPT NOTE

I. Background and objectives

To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA),¹ the Commission on the Status of Women at its 64th session (CSW64), will undertake a review and appraisal of progress made in its implementation and of the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.² The 25-year review will include an assessment of current challenges that affect implementation of the BPfA and the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women at the five-year milestone of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.³

As part of the 25-year review, the Economic and Social Council⁴ called on all States to undertake comprehensive national-level reviews of progress made and challenges encountered in this regard. It encouraged UN Regional Commissions to undertake reviews to feed into the global review. It also urged governments to collaborate with relevant stakeholders at all levels on preparations for the 2020 review so as to benefit from their experience and expertise.

To facilitate national-level reviews, UN-Women together with the regional commissions, issued a guidance note for comprehensive national-level reviews.⁵ This guidance note clusters the BPfA's 12 critical areas of concern into six overarching dimensions that highlight its alignment with the 2030 Agenda. This approach will be applied for the analysis of progress, gaps and challenges in the SG Report to generate lessons for the implementation of both frameworks in a mutually reinforcing manner. The six clusters are as follows:

- I. Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work
- II. Poverty eradication, social protection and social services
- III. Freedom from violence, stigma and stereotypes
- IV. Participation, accountability and gender-responsive institutions
- V. Peaceful and inclusive societies
- VI. Environmental conservation, protection and rehabilitation

The Secretary-General will prepare a report for CSW64 which will provide an assessment of the implementation of the BPfA in the current context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report will draw on the national and regional-level reviews, making recommendations for accelerating progress synergistically to realize the human rights of women and girls.

At the same time, the 25th anniversary is also an opportune time to reflect on current research, as well as trends and developments and how those relate to, and might impact on the immediate and longer-term prospects for the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It is an opportunity to examine in greater depth some of the key issues that have emerged since the adoption of

¹ Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995, chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

² ECOSOC resolution 2018/8.

³ General Assembly resolution 70/1.

⁴ E/RES/2018/8

⁵ Guidance note for comprehensive national-level reviews, September 2018. UN Women.

the BPfA, to assist the Commission in its deliberations. To this end, UN Women will convene an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in New York City on 25-26 September 2019.

The overall objective of the EGM is to assess what has changed over the last 25 years in the pursuit of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and women's and girls' human rights, and how those changes are impacting on future prospects for achieving the objectives of the BPfA and the SDGs from a gender perspective. To this end, the EGM will focus on four cross-cutting themes:

- I. Democratic backsliding and backlash against women's rights
- II. Gender equality implications of the digital revolution
- III. Gender equality and generational perspectives: young women in the struggle for economic, social and climate justice
- IV. The future of the peace, security and humanitarian agenda from a gender perspective

The EGM will develop recommendations for addressing challenges and charting a path forward.

II. Critical issues

The EGM will identify and analyze a set of emerging issues that are influencing global trends and challenges in the implementation of BPfA and the 2030 Agenda. For this purpose, four thematic panels have been identified (briefly elaborated below), in addition to an opening panel that will reflect on continuity and change since 1995. Experts will be invited to present their research findings on the selected themes, together with recommendations on the way forward.

Continuity and change

The EGM will first set the context and consider a broad perspective for the thematic discussions that will follow. The EGM will look back at the Beijing Conference and reflect on the momentous changes – economic, (geo)political, environmental, social and ideational – since then and the changed landscape for the implementation of global norms and standards, as well as feminist organizing and practice. Broad transformations, including the changing political economy of development, shifting geopolitical dynamics, the climate crisis and democratic erosions will be foregrounded to identify the challenges to women's rights. The EGM will propose strategic priorities for a forward-looking agenda that can seize existing opportunities, not least those presented by the 2030 Agenda, to resist the backlash against women's rights and make a real difference in the lives of women and girls.

Democratic erosion and backlash against women's rights

The 1990s were a time of hope and optimism in the international human rights movement and saw many positive changes for women's rights and human rights more broadly. Sealed at the height of the post-Cold War era, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was part of this broader landscape.

Yet the Beijing Platform for Action could not foresee the changing trends of recent years, including democratic reversals and attacks on women's rights and their defendants. While opposition to gender equality and women's rights is not new, 25 years after Beijing, feminists face a very different political context to that of the 1990s. Today women's human rights and those who advance them face two connected and troubling developments: first, a questioning of gender equality and the institutions and

policies aimed at achieving it; and second, the rise of anti-democratic forces whose agendas are imbued with discriminatory and patriarchal tendencies. These concomitant developments pose renewed challenges to the hard-won gains on women's rights and limit the scope for feminist action to institutionalize non-discrimination, gender equality and women's rights through laws, policies and public action.

Currently, almost one third of the world's population live in countries where democracy is facing challenges, including Western Europe and North America, and parts of Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe.⁶ Alongside the broader backsliding, there has been a growing backlash against gender equality and women's rights, both in national and international fora.⁷ Whether through electoral alliances, ministerial appointments or basic service delivery, these forces have gained influence in institutional politics, with the purported aim of bringing back a mythical past in which the nuclear family was the 'norm' and gender roles were 'natural'.⁸ While comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health and rights have been the main focus of attention, in fact, the impact has extended to a broader range of topics, including the questioning of violence against women, work and family reconciliation policies, and the content of public education.

The EGM will tackle the question of the different ways in which democratic erosion and backlash against women's rights are intertwined and influencing the pursuit of global norms. It will consider the interconnections between democratic erosion and backlash against women's rights, and examine the similarities and differences across regional contexts and the extent of their impacts on women's rights. The discussion should result in forward-looking strategies for countering backlash and advancing women's rights.

Gender implications of the digital revolution

The 'digital revolution' is one of the most rapid and far-reaching transformations since 1995. When global leaders first recognized the need to increase 'the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication' as a strategic objective in the BPfA, mobile phones were still in their infancy, Internet search engines were underdeveloped and major digital platforms were yet to be created.⁹ Today, digital technologies touch on

⁶ University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute. 2019. Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-DEM ANNUAL DEMOCRACY REPORT 2019. University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, accessed at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/democracy-reports/>

⁷ Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 541-560. Corredor, E. S. (2019). Unpacking "Gender Ideology" and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 613-638. Correa, S., Patternotte, D. and R. Kuhar. 2018. "The globalization of anti-gender campaigns". *International Politics and Society*, accessed at: <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/human-rights/article/show/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/>. AWID, 2017. "Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017", AWID, Toronto, accessed at: <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rights-at-risk-ours-2017.pdf>

⁸ Bracke, Sara and David Paternotte. 2017. "¡Habemus Género! La iglesia católica e ideología de género: Textos Seleccionados," Género y Política en América Latina, *Sexuality Policy Watch*, accessed at: <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/> Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 541-560.

⁹ <https://towardsdatascience.com/history-of-ai-484a86fc16ef>; <http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artificial-intelligence/>. See also E/CN.6/2018/4, Review theme: participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women

almost every aspect of economic, social and political life even as important inequalities in access and use prevail within and across countries, and between women and men.

Early feminist responses to the digital revolution were largely optimistic about the potential of digital technologies, particularly ICTs, for empowering women and transforming gender relations.¹⁰ Indeed, mobile phone technologies have been found to benefit women in their access to information and in facilitating collective action. Despite these benefits, inequalities in access to ICTs and men's control over women's use of ICTs, continue to persist.¹¹

Over the past decade, new risks and challenges related to fairness and inclusion, privacy and autonomy, accountability and transparency have also become increasingly apparent.¹² While the internet was initially viewed as a democratizing platform, for example through citizen reporting of news and information sharing, such early emancipatory promises increasingly ring hollow as a small group of tech giants monopolize power over data, and major online platforms are found complicit in the spread of misinformation, hate speech and cyber harassment. There are concerns that unprecedented levels of data mining, algorithms, and predictive risk models entrench existing inequalities and power dynamics, threaten individual rights and enable new forms of surveillance by governments and corporations.¹³

Locating gender equality within these broader structural trends and institutional changes requires to move beyond the focus on strengthening women's access to and use of digital technologies, on the one hand, and 'getting more women in tech', on the other. If 'technology as such is neither inherently patriarchal nor unambiguously liberating',¹⁴ but socially shaped, then feminist analysis must pay attention to the economic, social and political circumstances that influence the development and use of digital technologies in the current era. How can digital technologies be harnessed for accelerating progress towards gender equality in this context, rather than becoming 'assimilated into dominant structures of power'?¹⁵

The EGM will address the question of how technological change is influencing the realization of women's human rights. It will consider a conceptual framework for thinking about the relationship between digital technologies and gender equality, with attention to the structural factors (economic, social and political) underpinning the development, design and use of such technologies and their impacts on human rights. The discussion will also assess the implications of digital technology for women's rights to privacy and data protection, and framing digitality from a feminist perspective, and will propose steps and measures for further action.

¹⁰ Wajcman, J. 2009. "Feminist Theories of Technology." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, pp. 1-10; Faulkner, W. 2001. The technology question in feminism: A view from feminist technology studies. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24(1), 79-95.

¹¹ Tacchi, J., Kitner, K.R. and Crawford, K., 2012. Meaningful mobility: Gender, development and mobile phones. *Feminist Media Studies*, 12(4), pp.528-537; Sey, A. and Hafkin, N. (Eds). 2019. *Taking stock: Data and evidence on gender equality in digital access, skills and leadership*. United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society/International Telecommunications Union: Macau.

¹² A/HRC/35/9

¹³ Eubanks, V. 2018. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. St. Martin's Press; Zuboff, S. 2019, op. cit.

¹⁴ Wajcman, J. 2009. "Feminist Theories of Technology." *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, pp. 1-10.

¹⁵ Gurumurthy, A., Chamui, N., and Billorou, C. 2018. "Gender Equality in the Digital Economy: Emerging Issues." Issue Paper 1, Digital Justice Project, DAWN and ITforChange. https://itforchange.net/digital-justice-project/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/DJP_report.pdf

Gender equality and generational perspectives: Young women in the struggle for economic, social and climate justice

Over the past decade feminist organizations have gained greater visibility with street protests and social media activism denouncing violence against women, and women's strikes that draw attention to inequalities in time use, wages and working conditions, among others. A 'new generation' of young women, many of them born after 1995, is actively involved in these protests, impatient with the slow pace of change since then, and alarmed by the attacks on hard-won rights.¹⁶ The extensive use of social media has been highlighted as one of the attributes that sets younger activists apart from previous generations.¹⁷ While diversity and intersectionality have been defining features of feminist debates and movements since at least the 1970s, they have gained increasing attention in current feminist organizing, which locates itself at the intersection of gender with race, class and sexual orientation, among other factors.

Apart from their participation in feminist movements across the globe, young women have also been at the forefront of struggles for democracy, economic, social and climate justice: from climate strikes across Europe to the Arab spring and recent political changes in Sudan and Algeria; from racial justice and immigrant rights' movements in the United States to the student movement in Chile. The extent to which young women in these movements identify as feminists or integrate gender equality claims into their organizations is less well understood. Is this process of diffusion of feminist ideas and practices across other social movements something new? Or is it similar to developments in the early 1990s when feminist ideas proliferated across a wide range of organizations, including black, indigenous and landless movements, trade unions, universities, political parties and international development agencies?¹⁸

Other characteristics that set young feminists apart from older generations are also not very clear. Are there generational differences in the ways in which they organize both nationally and transnationally? How do younger feminists see the usefulness of global norms, such as CEDAW, the BPfA and the 2030 Agenda? How do they position themselves vis-à-vis the 'institutional strategies' which involved building gender equality 'machineries' within the state, so central at the time of the Beijing Conference? Are younger feminists more likely to prioritize street protests, grassroots organizing and cultural change in contrast to pursuing legal and policy change through insider-outsider alliances?¹⁹ Or do such differences emerge less along generational lines, instead reflecting diverse political positions and strategies that cut across different age groups? And what are the implications for the future of gender equality and women's and girls' rights?

Indeed, intergenerational overlaps and connections exist within and beyond feminist movements. In a recent global survey of young feminists, 63 per cent stated that they collaborate across generations, while 67 per cent stated that they collaborate across movements.²⁰ Less is known about the various forms that these collaborations take, the roles that different age groups play and the opportunities and tensions that may arise in the process.

¹⁶ Schuster, M. 2017. "Entre las luchas feministas y las respuestas conservadoras: Entrevista a Maxine Molyneux." *Nueva Sociedad*, November 2017, <https://nuso.org/articulo/luchas-feministas-molyneux/>

¹⁷ Milkman, R. 2016. "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest." *American Sociological Review*, pp. 1-31.

¹⁸ UNRISD. 2000. *Visible Hands: Taking Responsibility for Social Development*. Geneva; Alvarez, S. et al. 2003. "Encountering Latin American and Caribbean Feminisms." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(2), 537-579.

¹⁹ Herrera, G. and A.M. Larrea, forthcoming. "Translating the 2030 Agenda's gender equality commitments into national action: actors, processes and institutions in Ecuador." UN Women Discussion Paper, New York.

²⁰ FRIDA and AWID. 2016. *Brave, creative, resilient: The global state of young feminist organizing*.

The EGM will examine the generational dynamics of feminist movements. It will assess and interrogate the usefulness of the concept of ‘generation’ in relation to the study of social movements and feminist activism. The EGM will analyze, with concrete empirical examples, generational dynamics within feminist movements, including their challenges and possibilities, and identify promising examples of activism that integrate feminist claims into broader economic, social and environmental justice agendas, and will elaborate recommendations for further action

The peace, security and humanitarian agenda from a gender perspective

The year 2020 also marks the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the landmark Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security (WPS). This anniversary takes place at a critical moment, when more countries are experiencing some form of violent conflict than at any time in the previous three decades, and when violence and persecution are driving forced displacement to a new high.²¹ At the same time, women’s representation and meaningful participation in formal peace processes remains limited due to a number of deeply entrenched barriers. These include institutionalized gender bias and discrimination, high levels of sexual and gender-based violence, low levels of political participation among women prior to conflict, and lack of economic and social rights, which translate into intensified poverty, food insecurity and deprivation.²²

Equally disconcerting is that women’s access to education and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services, in crises and emergencies is constrained by distinct barriers. Beyond the weak and collapsing health systems and services, women are specifically held back by their limited economic autonomy combined with experiences of violence and limited power over their own sexual and reproductive lives that predate the conflict or crisis. At the same time, patterns of ‘development’ that prioritize large-scale investments in infrastructure, extractive industries and commercial agriculture not only bypass women who remain confined to small-scale and local initiatives,²³ but also risk ‘pushing them further behind’ through processes of displacement and eviction.²⁴ Economic and social rights, including the right to own and inherit land, to work and employment, that provide the preconditions for women’s equal participation remain unfulfilled, calling for structural changes in patterns of development.

The EGM will reflect on important shifts in the international system since 1995 and its implications for the WPS agenda. The WPS agenda was grounded in a ‘liberal peacebuilding’ architecture, which included human rights-centered approaches such as transitional justice, war crime trials, inclusive post-war governance, decentralization and democratization. How is women’s inclusion in these processes to be realized when support for the liberal peacebuilding agenda itself is on the decline, including support for institutions to support gender equality? If the political economy of gender inequality in fragile and conflict-affected societies has not been given sufficient attention, which in turn exacerbates conflict and undermines efforts to ‘build back better’, then what are the prospects for a more transformative agenda in the current context? The EGM will also discuss the role of women’s well-organized and skillful presence, whether in conflict resolution or peace-building, and identify existing challenges, lessons learned, as well as ways forward to strengthen women’s meaningful participation in these areas.

²¹ S/2018/900, para 4

²² S/2018/900, para 30

²³ S/2018/900, para 64

²⁴ Elson, D. 2018. Push No One Behind. CDP Background Paper No.43, DESA.

III. Profile of participants

The EGM will be attended by up to 20 experts, invited by the Executive Director of UN Women. In selecting the experts, criteria of geographical balance will be taken into consideration. Experts will include academics and practitioners with strong track records on the given themes, in accordance with the objectives identified above. UN Women will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to appointed experts as required. Select UN Women staff, as well as staff from other UN entities will attend the EGM as observers.

IV. Documentation

The documentation for the meeting will include:

- Expert papers: Short written contributions based on participants' relevant areas of expertise
- Three background papers commissioned by UN Women, as follows:

1. Democratic backsliding and backlash against women's rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics, by Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizsan

25 years since Beijing, feminists face a very different political context to that of the end of the Cold War, with unforeseen democratic reversals, including explicit attacks on women's human rights defenders. This paper will provide an analytical framework backed by empirical evidence to understand the links between broader democratic backsliding processes, the rise of right-wing politics, and the current backlash against women's rights, in light of the international commitments made to gender equality and women's empowerment.

2. The digital revolution: Implications for gender equality and women's rights, by Judy Wajcman

This paper will provide an overview of the development of digital (data-driven) technologies over the last 25 years. Applying an intersectional, (techno)feminist lens, it will explore how digital technologies can be harnessed for accelerating progress towards gender equality and equal opportunity, rather than becoming assimilated into dominant power structures. It posits how the 'fourth industrial revolution' has been pervasive across economic, social and political life, and how gender and technology are mutually shaping and co-constructed and gender power relations are inscribed into technologies. The paper will discuss education and social and welfare services in relation to advanced and developing economies and work mainly in relation to advanced economies.

3. The new feminist activism: Intergenerational perspectives, by Maxine Molyneux

Young women have taken the lead in a new wave of feminist and democratic protests that have erupted across a wide range of countries, North and South. These movements raise a range of political and analytic questions, which this research will address: To what extent is it useful to identify the recent wave of activism in terms of a new generation of activists? Is generation salient to the understanding of social movement activism? How different is the 'new' feminism to earlier forms, and what differences and continuities divide and unite the generations?

V. Organization

The EGM will be convened by UN Women on 25-26 September 2019 and will be held at NYU Center for Global Affairs, New York, 10007, USA. It will be conducted in English and all documentation will be in English. The EGM will meet in plenary and potentially in working groups. Plenary presentations by background paper authors and all other experts will create the framework for discussions. Two co-chairs will be appointed by the experts at the beginning of the EGM to oversee the meeting and preparation of an EGM report.

VI. Expected outcomes

The outcome of the EGM will be a report, containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations directed at Member States and other stakeholders. The report will be widely disseminated, made available at CSW64 and on the website of UN Women.