
UN Women
Expert Group Meeting
‘Envisioning women’s rights in the post-2015 context’

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I. Changes in Global Context since Beijing World Conference in 1995:

Many changes in the past 20 years both build on the BPFA as well as point to the areas that need further attention in the next 20 years. I outline some here in terms of achievements and challenges, followed by why the BPFA is still relevant.

A. Achievements: Many challenges still exist but women have gained amazing ground in the last 20-40 years when compared to women’s status over the past centuries of patriarchal dominance.

1. Women and Gender are on the Agenda. Awareness and Media Attention to women’s status, and sometimes rights, has grown exponentially, particularly with regard to Violence Against Women (VAW) and Political participation. The range of violence, its multiple manifestations and forms as well as the extent and diversity of its geography, and the universality of its reach are better known. **Sexual Violence in War and conflict is exposed in the media and a visible focus of “Women, Peace and Security”** in the UN Security Council. The question of VAW, pioneered by women’s groups, has been “mainstreamed” into many quarters - Human Rights and Development INGOs, governments, the UN, etc.

2. Standard setting, Legislation and creation of Mechanisms to address women’s rights nationally, regionally, and globally have advanced. A variety of special mechanisms and rapporteurs on issues of women have been created regionally and globally. The Beijing call for an **Optional Protocol to strengthen CEDAW was adopted in 2000** and most countries have ratified the Convention, with even a few removing reservations to it. The call for gender mainstreaming in non-women specific institutions has led to advances, been such as the inclusion of gender-based persecution and sexual violence as crimes against humanity in **the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court (1998) and in the creation of a**

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Special Representative of the SG on Sexual Violence during Armed Conflict who monitors and reports on this issue to the Security Council.

Regional mechanisms have been created to work for realization of women's rights: the Inter-Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (1993); The Optional Protocol on Women's Human Rights to the African Charter on Peoples and Human Rights (2000), the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2011). **Nationally, changes in laws and government policies regarding women have been passed, especially on domestic violence and rape, as well as various national programs adopted to address aspects of the BPFA.** The gap between standards set and implementation remains a challenge, but standards contribute to women's awareness of their rights, and to social acceptance that violations against women should be punished.

3. Growth in the diversity of women's constituencies claiming rights has led to new constituencies and adds to an understanding of the intersection of gender with other factors – key to realization of the universality of rights for. Indigenous, immigrant, disabled, lesbian, younger and older women, as well as racial, ethnic and cultural minorities, among others, have come forward with their particularized stories of discrimination and strategies for change. Women are more visible as leaders in other social movements, such as peasant and land rights groups - highlighting the **potential of greater collaboration of feminist activists and other social movements.**

B. Challenges and Backlash: Deeply embedded patriarchy in all our systems has revealed how complicated social change is, as well as shown the inevitable resistance to such change in a historically short period of time.

1. A huge gap remains between women's rights agreements and norms and accountability to and implementation of them. Most governments pay little more than lip service to their obligations to the rights of women. For example, Vienna and Beijing legitimized the urgency of combatting violence against women as an imperative, but impunity for this violence still rages around the globe, with no discernible decrease in its prevalence. **Governments seem increasingly unwilling and/or unable to assume accountability for violations of women and particularly for addressing the structural aspects of gender inequality.**

2. Economic inequality has grown, with the forces of privatization taking over what were once seen as governmental obligations (schools, prisons, etc.) raising the question of how to achieve substantive equality for women. Poor women are both denied their equal rights to employment, education, and property, and made more vulnerable to other abuses such as child marriage, domestic violence and trafficking as a consequence. **One of the key challenges today is the growing gap between women whose economic and social status has improved, and those who have been further marginalized as the gap between rich and poor, connected and powerless, has widened and deepened.**

3. Pervasiveness of Militarism and heightened Focus on Terrorism and National Security has endangered women as targets of conflict and pushed issues of Human Rights

and Gender Equality to the back burner. In addition to its immediate implications for violence against all citizens, a militarized economy and culture both reinforces the use of force for domination of “the other” and strips governments of the resources to address social and economic needs, including resources to combat violence against women.

4. Backlash against women’s rights and has grown stronger in many regions and in inter-governmental negotiations at the United Nations. Conservative, extremist and fundamentalist backlash against women's claims to equality, and especially to sexual and reproductive rights, has seized on **national sovereignty, culture and religion** as excuses for perpetuating discrimination and VAW. The claim of “Universality” of human rights has been undermined just as women were gaining recognition of our rights as human rights. Backlash has also leads to and feeds **increased attacks on Women Human Rights Defenders.**

5. Civil Society and social movements are experiencing direct and indirect efforts to limit their influence and an atmosphere of frustration often pervades global arenas like the United Nations, where feminists are forced to defend past gains more than move forward. The BPFA was adopted when optimism at the end of the cold war led to greater Civil Society space at the UN and a sense of progress on human rights prevailed. The combined challenges above have led to stagnation in UN negotiations and to increasing pessimism and fragmentation in women’s movements efforts at the UN.

II. Continued Relevance of the BPFA as a concrete agreement by 189 nations that provides a framework for implementation and advancement of women.

1. The BPFA affirms that women’s rights are human rights and universal to women everywhere. It assumes global action on the rights of women locally is a legitimate interest of the international community. These critical battles won in Vienna in 1993 and advanced in Beijing frame the BPFA and provide a crucial human rights context for countering the backlash against women’s and for holding governments accountable to them.

2. The strategic objectives and action plans in each of the critical areas of concern still provide concrete agreement by governments on the types of actions needed by governments and relevant stakeholders at national, regional and global levels. While many specifics beyond those in the BPFA are needed, it (and agreed conclusions from the CSW over the past 20 years) provide the basis for assessment of what types of action is needed to achieve state accountability and due diligence toward their implementation.

3. The BPFA reminds us what women’s rights advocates can achieve when networking across geographic and issue boundaries, working to bring in influential civil society allies, and collaborating across lines of civil society, governments, and international organizations. The BPFA was a product of women crossing borders and sectors - across all these lines - and could not have been achieved by any one of these alone. **The strategic challenge now is to find new forms of such collaboration in the current global context, both in the UN and in other arenas, that will take this historic struggle for gender equality and the realization of the full human rights of all forward.**

**Parts of this paper are taken from a longer article by Charlotte Bunch and Roxanna Carrillo to be published by Routledge in 2015 as part of the “Women and Girls Rising” Conference Book.*