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

New York, New York
3-5 November 2014

The Beijing Platform for Action on Women’s and Girls’ Rights and Its Relevance Today

Expert paper prepared by:

Faiza Jama Mohamed*
Equality Now, Nairobi Office Director

2015 is a critical year both because it marks the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and end of the Millennium development Goal; The new post-2015 sustainable development agenda must be in alliance with international human rights standards and draw on the Beijing Platform for Action which is still relevant today, not just in Africa, but around the world.

Countries must not be allowed to go back on their commitments at the 4th World Conference on Women; The last couple of years at the Commission on the Status of women we have seen countries regress on women and girls rights, including by trying to rely on "national sovereignty", "culture" and "tradition" arguments - the very antithesis of international law and all it stands for - to stall consensus on profoundly prevalent human rights violations such as violence against women and girls. In addition, although the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) calls countries to revoke any remaining discriminatory laws we have even seen new sex discriminatory laws come into force as recently as Kenya's Marriage Act of 2014 which allows polygamy.

At the same time we have seen progress with the development of regional human rights instruments such as the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, which Equality Now and other organizations all over Africa helped to draft, get adopted and ratified by African Union (AU) member states as well as the adoption of a comprehensive General Assembly resolution on the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM). We have seen Africa launch 2010-2020 as African Women’s Decade in an effort to accelerate gender equality and women’s empowerment following criticisms about lack of implementation of commitments made to women.

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

The fight to end FGM is just one example of how the Beijing Platform for Action is still relevant today. The platform calls for governments to "Enact and enforce legislation against the perpetrators of practices and acts of violence against women, such as female genital mutilation... and give vigorous support to the efforts of non-governmental and community organizations to eliminate such practices; (para 124(i)). Although now 20[†] of the 28 FGM practicing countries in Africa have laws against FGM compared to 3[‡] in 1995, several FGM practicing countries with high prevalence rates such as Mali still do not have laws against FGM and other countries have never enforced their laws or are just starting to now as in Egypt where it has taken the death of a 13 year-old girl from FGM and activism to bring about a case (Soheir's case).

Another example of the relevance of the BPfA is the ongoing violation of women and girls' rights in conflict situations which must be addressed by the post-2015 agenda as we struggle with the implementation of Resolution 1325 and subsequent Security Council resolutions on the issue. There were 32 conflicts in 1995 but today there are 69 conflicts[§] ongoing in the world. The number of conflicts has more than doubled! And as we daily observed and continue to from media reports women and girls are in grave danger and suffering from all sorts of human rights violations. In DR Congo alone at least 200,000 women were raped since 1998.

The world is pretty much still an unfavourable place for women and girls: increase in conflicts, militarization, impact of climate change, widespread poverty, trafficking, violence against women, and now Ebola. The human rights of women and girls are being violated left and right. Not only are the 12 critical areas reflected in the BPfA relevant today but require serious action to realize targets set.

Conclusion

The UN has an important role to play in guiding member states to do the right thing - including by loudly encouraging the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, even without a strong enforcement mechanism.

Support from UN Women in partnership with CSOs can go a long way in encouraging member states to adopt and implement a multi-sectoral approach (MSA) to fast track implementation of their obligations under CEDAW and the African Protocol on the Rights of Women. Both instruments are in line with the vision articulated in the BPfA commitments.

While progress be made in several countries in terms of women's political participation women largely continue to be marginalized and discriminated against. Why women in leadership are not having positive impact on the lives of community?

The issue today is about implementation of commitments and fulfilling obligations including ending impunity! The Sustainable Development Goals must provide an avenue to advance the vision and targets set in the BPfA.

[†] Benin, Burkina Faso, CAR, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda. Also, though there is no country ban of FGM 11 states of Nigeria prohibit FGM.

[‡] CAR, Djibouti and Ghana. The latter two have since strengthened their laws.

[§] According to globalsecurity.org and conflictmap.org (Crisis Group)