



BRIEFING

25 Years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: A Youth Report

1. INTRODUCTION

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) was signed on the 1st of October 1995 following the Fourth World Conference on Women. All UN member states signed this progressive and milestone blueprint for advancing women's rights which provides a framework covering 12 areas of concern. The BDPfA, and these 12 areas of concern specifically, will be reflected upon in this report from the perspective of youth from around the world.

Although the BPfA has comprehensive objectives, many of which are yet to be achieved and are still relevant, regular reflections are needed to ensure it is updated with current and emerging matters relating to gender equality. The 25th anniversary presents us with an opportunity to review the critical areas of concern by their current status, successes and challenges that relate to youth inclusion and participation. This

report will also consider areas missing from the Platform for Action including those that have emerged since 1995.

This report¹ reflects on the worldviews which influenced the BPfA and seeks to consider how perspectives from privileged voices within the Global North came to dominate these international policies and processes. Global conversations on intersectional inequalities and movements to understanding and address the persistent dynamics created by the legacies of colonialism offer a context for these reflections.

This Youth Report, written on the basis of eight regional consultations (see last page), concludes with recommendations for an inclusive and comprehensive approach to gender sensitive policy making, to gender equity in decision-making forums and to meaningful youth participation.

2. REFLECTION ON 12 CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN



The BPfA is structured in a mission statement, a global framework and an action plan with institutional and financial arrangements. Moreover, it addresses twelve critical areas of concern that point out aspects for improvement in regard to gender equality. The areas of concern are as follows:

1. Women and poverty
2. Education and training of women
3. Women and health
4. Violence against women
5. Women and armed conflict
6. Women and the economy
7. Women in power and decision-making
8. Insufficient mechanisms for the advancement of women
9. Human rights of women
10. Women and the media
11. Women and the environment
12. The girl-child.

Concerning women and poverty, many achievements have been made since the signing of the declaration: household incomes have increased; new opportunities have emerged in the world of work for women; and efforts aligned to the Millennium Development Goals have made progress in this area. However, poverty continues to be an issue of concern and increasingly, there is recognition that poverty eradication efforts must be designed to address marginalisation and intersectional oppression that not only relates to gender but also to other demographics including age.

Education and training of women is closely tied to poverty eradication and economic stability. Providing space for education and the enhancement of knowledge is crucial especially for adolescents and youth, since they will form an increasing proportion of

the workforce in the years to come. Education, both formal and non-formal, needs further investment and resourcing to make it accessible to everybody, including people with disabilities. It is recommended that special focus be on comprehensive sexual education, to provide young people the knowledge they need in order to live a healthy life.

Women and health constitutes another area which continues to be important, because of its far-reaching impacts. Women's health is linked to their human rights including access to safe medical treatment, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and access to clean water and nutritious food. Health services have been expanded, however, taxation on hygienic products and stigma as well as discrimination around menstruation and abortion are still very present issues which affect young people disproportionately.

Stigma and social taboos have also persisted around issues of violence against women. People experiencing physical or psychological violence on the basis of their gender are frequently met with a lack of understanding and limited sources of support. This lack of awareness and social stigma of gender-based violence also undermines the effectiveness of attempts to tackle it. Violence is still an ongoing problem taking the form of domestic or sexual violence, femicide, human trafficking as well as many other forms.

In addition, women in armed conflicts are at a higher risk of experiencing violence, in particular sexual abuse and modern slavery. Displaced women, refugees and women who witness military interventions are also at a higher risk of being subject to sexual abuse and modern slavery. 25 years after the fourth world conference on women we still have women facing the brunt of war and are being used as sex slaves during armed conflicts. The United

Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security lays the foundation for the participation, protection and support of women during armed conflicts. Despite efforts around the 'Women, Peace and Security' agenda, women and girls are still underrepresented in decision-making in peace processes. With the continuity of conflict and the grievous effects it has on women and girls, there is a need for more to be done to ensure their protection in armed conflict.



The BPfA indicated that women in the economy are treated unequal, since they receive lower wages, face employment difficulties due to maternity leave, and carry the burden of a disproportionate amount of domestic labour. Whilst there is progress in terms of women's participation in the workforce, there is a widening gender pay gap and women continue to perform the majority of domestic labour. Furthermore, trafficking women and girls into forced labor, commercial sexual exploitation and slavery like practices, continue to rise in the absence of socio-economic protective measures.

There is a lack of women in power and decision-making at all levels. Women are not just underrepresented, their issues are not taken seriously, neither are they meaningfully supported to participate effectively. However, women, youth, adolescents and people representing minorities play a significant role in developing holistic perspectives, effective policies in all spheres and mainstreaming a gender perspective.

Insufficient mechanisms and processes for the advancement of women, are a challenge due to a lack of structural support for women and marginalized people. A lack of funding and a lack of mainstreaming the issues affecting women hinder gender equality. Those in decision-making positions continue to have a limited understanding and information on women's lived experiences, as well as those of other marginalized people.

Women's rights are human rights. These rights include access to land, property and housing or the right for peace and security. The right for dignity, choice and freedom are fundamental rights regarding bodily autonomy.

Women in the media are often portrayed in a sexualized way that objectifies female bodies. Due to the wide-spread increased access to the internet and thus of digital media as well as advertisement, rigid gender roles and gender concepts and their representations are being entrenched more and more. Young people grow up with the media influencing them through gender stereotypes and a lack of representation affecting their view of the reality of their community, and of the world. It is vital to reflect on representation of gender in the media, including centering underrepresented groups, to enable us to achieve a more equitable representation and tackle gender inequalities more widely. Lack of continuous and updated capacity

building of media professionals about the complex issues related to human trafficking, irregular migration and other related issues puts vulnerable communities more at risk by subjecting victims to revictimization. Therefore, media officials need to be trained about human-centered approaches in covering such issues.

Women and the environment have played a significant role in advancing environmental protection over the last 25 years, with many environmental movements led by women. Since 1995, climate change has accelerated and so there is a need for a growth of feminist and ecological movements to address this key challenge, which will be reflected on further in the next chapter.

In closing, the importance of the girl-child shall not be overlooked, as young girls are among the most vulnerable members of society. Modern Slavery including child-marriage and child labour, female genital mutilation, and a lack of access to education are still challenges that millions of girls face. Although many of these issues have been addressed somewhat, trafficking and enslavement of children, especially of young girls, is still an all too common practice.

3. MISSING AREAS



As noted above, the BPfA is a comprehensive document and marks a milestone for international policy related to gender equality. However, new areas of concern have appeared or come to the fore in the intervening years which require attention. These include: climate justice, technology, intersectional inequalities, trafficking in women and girls and modern slavery, menstrual poverty and stigma, and the resourcing of feminist movements. Each of these areas impact on our ability to realise a more gender equitable world.

3.1 Climate Justice and Gender

The climate crisis is rapidly accelerating and will change our way of living dramatically in the years to come. The loss of livelihoods due to weather change, forced relocation, drought, floods, hurricanes, rising sea levels and other climate impacts will continue to increase. In challenging situations like this,

marginalized people face a higher risk of becoming even more marginalized. Young girls are the first ones at risk to be removed from school when financial instabilities occur in the family, owing to the inviability of small-scale agricultural cultivation activities due to climate change or the impacts of loss of habitats on rural communities. These girls are at a higher risk of becoming domestic slaves, child brides, or put into forced agricultural labor.

3.2 Technology and Gender

A rising aspect in recent years is the importance of technology and technical opportunities as well as challenges. Due to the spread of the internet and other digital spaces, women face a higher risk of facing cyber violence and human trafficking. Even though technology is widely spread around the world, access to the internet, education, and news are limited by

inequalities based on age, gender and in rural areas. In addition, young women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are not taken seriously and face discrimination in attempts to pursue these disciplines. Related to technology, we also have data gaps and biases in technology which ignore the realities of women, especially women of colour, queer women and disabled women.

3.3 Intersectional Inequalities



Through the term was coined by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw before the 4th World Conference on Women, there has been an increasing awareness of the idea of intersectional oppression and inequality. Originally intended to explore how Black women in the US were discriminated against differently to White women or Black men, theorising from this term highlights the need to consider how individuals identities intersect in the marginalisation they face, and what is needed in the policies to address this. People from the Global South, people of colour, LGBTQI+ people and people with disabilities, amongst others, are identities and experiences that it is important for us to consider as intersecting with gender in any approach to gender equality. Discrimination, marginalization, and oppression put the most vulnerable at risk of becoming trafficked and enslaved.

3.4 Menstrual Poverty and Stigma

Stigma around menstruation has caused this experience to be overlooked in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is not a new issue to emerge in the last 25 years, but some of that stigma has been tackled allowing us to assess the extent of the problem around lack of access to safe menstruation practices and lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education to facilitate their adoption.

3.5 Trafficking in Women and Girls

The Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime only passed in the year 2000. Even though the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has put forward trafficking in women and girls as a priority area under violence against women, the issue remains exclusive with minimal efforts especially on national and local levels around it in the global south. The field of activism against trafficking in women and girls still lacks the existence of youth-led initiatives at all levels. There is also a huge lack of funds for youth led initiatives.

3.6 Resourcing Feminist Movements

Feminist movements are key for a more gender equitable world and for gender sensitive policy making, which is why they need more support and greater resourcing. Civil society involvement, including youth activists, should be recognised as a vital part of international processes, dialogue and policy-making in order to create effective and robust policies. Furthermore, within feminist movements it is crucial to acknowledge youth voices with meaningful youth participation in discussions and to

strengthen youth access to decision-making roles.

The focus of policy making for gender equality needs to move to a more intersectional approach - such an approach wasn't sufficiently included in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. At the same time, feminist movements must avoid tokenism of minorities, youth or people of

colour ensuring meaningful participation of these groups. We need to mainstream feminist approaches to policy making including strengthening the use of gender sensitive language, which has actually been decreasing in international treaties most recently.

4. THE MEANING OF A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION



Writing a declaration to capture specific objectives and an action plan is an effective form to create shared values and goals. A universal declaration provides the ability to determine an effective way to achieve defined targets. However, one risk of this universalising approach is to create an imbalance in the importance placed on the perspectives of diverse groups. In international processes there is a precedent for the perspectives of those from the Global North to be valued more than others, leading to declarations and policies which overlook the approaches, knowledge and experiences of other cultures. The Eurocentrism of actors in research, private sector, and civil society and the inequitable distribution of resources amongst governments all serve to maintain the persistent legacies of colonialism and associated power structures.

Even though it is hard to unify diverse values and perspectives under a set of international shared goals, collaborative and inclusive processes can better acknowledge these historic factors and create more effective and adaptable policies going forward. Insights from marginalized society members including people of colour, migrants, indigenous people, nomadic and traveller people, religious and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ people amongst others should be more thoroughly incorporated into policy-making spaces. These perspectives are diverse and therefore can be contrary or ambivalent to any issue under discussion, but they highlight lived realities and expand our thinking of future possibilities.

5.CONCLUSION



Looking back at the fourth World Conference of Women and the signing of the BPfA, it's nomination as a milestone moment for gender equality is justified. The declaration covers many areas of concern and highlights many important issues. However, for future implementation making use of this document, readers should keep in mind that not only women, but also intersex and people of minority genders are impacted by these areas of concern as well, and that their experiences and needs will again vary depending on their sexual orientation, whether they are people with disabilities, whether they are indigenous, nomadic or traveller people, whether they are people of colour, on their national context, on whether they are a religious or ethnic minority, and on many more other factors.

Besides the usage of a more inclusive language, their perspectives should be

embedded in policy-making processes and international conversations. In particular, as youth make up an increasing percentage of the global population, youth voices and meaningful youth participation should be amplified and taken more into account.

Section four of this report reflected upon the structures underpinning many of our past declarations, demonstrating the dominance of perspectives from the Global North that influence world ideologies and historical hegemonies. Despite the need of shared global goals, a singular unifying declaration can often overlook our realities and aspirations. Going forward we need inclusive processes which allow the rich varieties of our lived experience to be brought to the table to inform policy which can be adapted and related to a multitude of contexts.

¹ This report is based on youth consultations facilitated in February 2020 from regional reports of Latin America, Asia, Africa, Pacific, Arab States, Europe/Central Asia and North America.