

## BEIJING, BACKLASH, AND THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

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**T**he United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing this September 1995, occurs at a historical juncture for women. As we increasingly make our voices heard globally, the urgent need for women to be an integral part of the decision-making processes shaping the twenty-first century has never been more pressing. Indeed, the experience of women is central to a multitude of the world's concerns ranging from religious fundamentalism and chauvinistic nationalism to the global economy. As the old world order continues its process of disintegration, transition, and re-organization, the opportunity for women to be heard is enhanced precisely because new alternatives are so badly needed. However, at the same time, there looms a danger that women's gains in the twentieth century will be turned back by religious fundamentalist forces and/or narrowly defined patriarchal nationalisms, which seek cohesion by returning women to traditional roles. In confronting these forces, women's voices must be heard.

The first UN Decade for Women, from 1976 to 1985, helped legitimize women's projects and demands for greater participation in civil society at the local, national, and international levels. In the decade since the 1985 World Confer-

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ence on Women, held in Nairobi, women have sought an ever-greater voice in the formulation of global policy questions. During this time period, worldwide mobilization has enabled women to have significant impact on UN world conferences, including the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the UN World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (Cairo, 1994), and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995).

Acknowledgement of women as fresh sources of energy, ideas, and strategies has been increasingly apparent in the documents and programs these conferences have generated. With regard to human rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights recognized that women's human rights are universal, inalienable, and indivisible—and should not be subordinated to culture or religion. For the first time, the UN called for elimination of “violence against women in public and private life” as a human rights obligation.

Further, women succeeded in gaining widespread recognition of women's rights as human rights and advanced the process of creating mechanisms for monitoring and demanding accountability for abuses of women's human rights. In particular, a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women was appointed and efforts toward strengthening the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) were reinforced. The Vienna Declaration also called for integration of women and incorporation of gender perspectives into all human rights mechanisms and practices, including gender training for those responsible for protecting and promoting human rights.

Women's participation in the Vienna Conference also allowed other issues of concern to women, such as poverty and reproductive rights, to be understood within the context of human rights. In Cairo, this led to the ICPD Programme of Action reaffirming the human rights of women to life, liberty, security of person, and to an adequate standard of living as critical principles of population and sustainable development policies.

These conferences, together with their preparatory processes, have proven to be opportunities for women to be both

heard and educated about mechanisms for insuring inclusion of a gender perspective in the international arena. One of the most powerful features of UN world conferences are the non-governmental (NGO) forums which are held parallel to the official governmental event. In this regard, the NGO Forum at the Beijing Conference, to be attended by over 30,000 people—the largest number ever registered for such an event—will play a critical role in bringing together women with a diverse range of responses to contemporary problems and questions. As women are progressively more involved in world politics and facing greater challenges to their movements, the Beijing NGO Forum offers a unique opportunity to exchange experiences and strategies in the development of a global analysis of women's status, and in the execution of cohesive strategies that cross national boundaries.

Undeniably, international conferences have significantly increased women's participation, not only at the international level but also at the local and national levels, where women's voices have helped to determine how their governments interact with international bodies. An unprecedented number of women have been involved locally and at regional preparatory conferences, demanding accountability from their governments in advance for positions they will take in Beijing. In fact, organizing locally, nationally, and regionally has been an important way to involve women who are unable to travel to Beijing in the process.

The determination to include a gender perspective in global debates and as an integral part of policy-making nationally, regionally, and internationally is vital not just at conferences, but beyond them as well. More and more, women are connecting their experience in local community leadership to global policy making, where decisions affecting our daily lives are made. Locally, women have been maintaining families and holding communities together not only in the face of adverse economic circumstances and civil strife, but in an environment in which sexual discrimination and sexist attitudes diminish our contributions to society.

Participation of women is key to expanding global debates and the national and international policies emanating from them. Ultimately, this requires more than just integrating women into these discussions—it means transforming the

discussions themselves. In demonstrating that “women’s issues” are interconnected with global issues, women link individual experience to the social—logically proving the relevance of their experience to policy development. For example, violence against women and children in the home can be understood as existing on a continuum of violence and domination in the world that includes war and racial conflict. Therefore, it becomes clear that societal conflicts will not diminish so long as we tolerate violence in the family, where children are taught to accept and use violence to resolve differences and achieve control over others.

The human rights framework offers an ethical basis for inclusion of women and a gender perspective in the transformation of global policy. Human rights principles contain the indisputable assertion of the universal dignity of *all* humankind, and of the rights of all citizens to participate in shaping the social order. Women’s potential to participate in and transform society and to achieve full employment, equitable social integration, and a healthy environment depend on respect for and protection of women’s human rights to:

- speak and participate in the public world by exercising the fundamental rights of citizenship and democracy;
- control their bodies and lives in the private world, without which it is often impossible to exercise public rights;
- gain shelter, food, education, health, and a healthy environment, and to seek employment in order to secure a livelihood.

These rights are included in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when interpreted from the perspective of women’s lives. Unfortunately, though, human rights practice and jurisprudence have been shaped using male life experience as the norm and by interpreting, illustrating, and enforcing human rights only from that perspective. While certain aspects of human rights abuse are the same for men and women, much of it is gendered: that is, the ways in which women are abused and experience torture, imprisonment, slavery, displacement, and other violations are often specifically shaped by the fact of being female.

Active participation of women in policy-making ensures

that global issues—peace, environment, development, human security, human rights, and democracy—will be viewed from a gender-conscious perspective. Thus, work accomplished on so-called “women’s issues,” including equal pay, the feminization of poverty, violence against women, and reproductive rights, will influence the formulation of social policy questions and the understanding of societal problems.

Today, women are at the epicenter of the assault on human rights, democracy, and human dignity. In the face of national conflict and various chauvinisms, it is imperative that respect for human dignity be a fundamental principle of the world order. The human rights framework counters the narrow religious fundamentalisms and nationalistic chauvinisms so prevalent in contemporary societies. These insular systems of belief exacerbate polarization in much of the world and deny the basic humanity of “the other” — based on race, religion, and culture as well as gender. Because these reactionary forces emphasize male control of women, viewing them as the ultimate “other” and therefore confining them to subordinate positions, the defense of women’s human rights is critical to development, democracy and human rights.

Women have been consistently vocal in UN debates and arenas in the 1990s. Yet, despite this progress, the challenge of the 1995 Beijing Conference is to ensure that the conference itself is recognized as part of women’s efforts to address all of the world’s problems, and not seen as a return to a separate, isolated ghetto for women’s issues. The Beijing Conference must be utilized to discuss women’s demands and perspectives on a global agenda that crosses divisions between issues, and understands that development, democracy, human rights, and human security are all women’s issues. They are inter-related and must be addressed together if we are to create a healthy, equitable, and sustainable planet for the twenty-first century.