


From Mexico to Beijing: International

by *Deborah Stienstra*

Cet article donne un aperçu des engagements internationaux du passé tout en les comparant avec la plate-forme de Beijing en 1995. La plate-forme a utilisé de nouvelles connaissances

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pour solidifier certains engagements précédents tout en soulevant de nouveaux débats. Cependant, l'application de ces engagements dépend toujours de la bonne volonté des gouvernements et des efforts de ses citoyens.

Beijing '95 was a women's happening. The Non-Governmental (NGO) Forum brought together 30,000 women from around the world. The United Nations Conference on Women, the governmental meeting, adopted the Platform for Action which called on governments to increase the speed and intensity of their actions to bring positive change in women's lives. Yet Beijing was, in many ways, the culmination of many years of women's organizing, in their own communities and globally. In this article, I will outline some of the history of women's organizing globally and previous international commitments on women, and assess to what extent the Platform for Action is a step forward towards women's equality. While the Platform for Action provides many examples of clear actions governments and others need to take, incorporates all women into all areas of the document and raises new and emerging issues of concern, it fails to go far enough in providing measures to ensure government action. Citizens and women's groups need to press governments to act on the commitments they have made over the past 20 years.

From Mexico to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women

Women have been organizing internationally for at least 150 years (Stienstra 1994). Many women have also called on international organizations, like the United Nations (UN), to coordinate and encourage government action for positive change in women's lives. The most

recent road to Beijing was begun in 1972 when representatives of women's groups convinced several governments to call for an international women's year. This year took place in 1975 and was celebrated with an international governmental Conference and a non-governmental Forum on women in Mexico City. Governments agreed to a Plan of Action focused on three themes, equality, development, and peace, and to promote action over the following ten years. The Plan of Action was more like a shopping list of issues of concern to women. It had no framework and little analysis of the reasons for these issues. Issues included those traditionally associated with women: the family, education, health, political participation, and employment. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worked, unsuccessfully, to strengthen the Plan and especially called for a body to monitor its implementation.

In Mexico, governments also approved the United Nations Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985. Midway through the Decade, a second international Conference on women and NGO Forum were held in Copenhagen. Their job was to assess how much governments had implemented the Mexico Plan of Action and identify priority areas for action in the following five years. The government Conference adopted a Program for Action which targeted three areas, education, health, and employment, as priorities for the rest of the Decade. This document, however, embedded assumptions held by many officials, especially that there was a uniform women's perspective or situation. It failed to address the systemic barriers to women's participation in society and only included a footnote that said that defacto discrimination against women was called sexism in some countries.


Just before the Copenhagen Conference, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also known as the Women's Convention. It pulled together all the earlier pieces of international law related to women and was written on the premise that women and men must be equal before the law, women should be able to live free of discrimination on the basis of their sex and they should be full participants in society. The Convention has standing as international law and legally binds the 139 countries which have ratified it.

At the culmination of the Decade, a third inter-governmental Conference was held in Nairobi together with a very large NGO Forum. The governmental Conference adopted the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000 (FLS). The FLS was different in many ways from the earlier documents, although it retained the focus on the themes of the Decade, equality, development, and peace. The FLS adopted

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an analytic approach and explored some of the causes of women's situations, providing some prescriptive measures to address obstacles to the advancement of women. It also addressed many areas that had not been part of the earlier documents including transportation, energy, the

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environment, the participation of girls and women in science and technology, the needs of poor urban women, and the concerns of refugee and visible minority women. The FLS thus expanded the scope of activity related to women, recognizing that all issues are women's issues. The FLS also recognized that for true advancement to occur, women needed to be actively involved in the changes to their lives, not only as objects of governmental action. It thus called for women to play "a central role as intellectuals, policy-makers, decision-makers, planners, and contributors and beneficiaries of development" (FLS, Paragraph 15). The FLS broke new ground in its focus on gender rather than just on women. It called on governments to promote men's participation as well as women's in the raising of families and in household management. It also linked public violence such as in war with private or domestic violence such as the abuse of women by their partners and the abuse of children.

In many ways, the FLS brought together the many years of work by women and NGOs. It helped to focus on a recognition that for women's situations to change, all women's concerns need to be addressed and that women need to be full and active participants in all areas of society especially in decision-making.

Nevertheless the FLS was not all that women's groups had hoped for. It discussed the situations of specific groups of women, including young women, disabled women, refugee women, poor women, and minority women separate from issues of concern to all women, thus marginalizing the situations of these women. It was also very long (372 paragraphs) and written in "UN-ese" that is, language that is often unclear, repetitive, and difficult to follow. As it was written, the FLS was difficult to use as a tool for community action.

From Nairobi to Beijing: the context for the Platform for Action

In the years following the Nairobi Conference, for most governments, the FLS was seen as the end result, not the means by which to attain the ends. In the 1990 review on the implementation of the FLS, very few governments responded with actions they had undertaken to address the FLS. From what information was available, the United Nations illustrated that while there was some positive change in some areas such as education across the world, there were some significant losses for many women especially as a result of structural adjustment policies adopted by many governments. These policies slowed or reversed trends that would have benefited many women. Many governments had adopted legislation dealing with the concerns of the FLS but had not given sufficient resources to make sure this legislation could be adequately implemented or monitored. One of the recommendations that came out of the 1990 review was that different ways to ensure better implementation of the FLS were needed.

It was in this context that the Platform for Action was drafted. The Beijing Conference was to provide a second review of the implementation of the FLS and adopt a Platform for Action that would outline areas where urgent and priority action would be needed over the coming five years. It was not intended to override the FLS but intensify action on the implementation of the FLS. Twelve priority areas were chosen: poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights, the media, the environment, and the girl child. The second review of the FLS notes that

The balance after 10 years is less disquieting than might have been feared, but less progress has been registered than was hoped. The challenge for the final five years of the Strategies [FLS] is to build on what has provoked change and address the key obstacles to progress. (*From Nairobi to Beijing* vii)

The Beijing Conference also took place at a point in time that has shaped the Platform for Action. It was one in a series of world conferences called by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali to set a new global agenda to chart new paths for international actions (CBFC 5). These conferences addressed the child, environment and development, human rights, population and development, social development, women and habitat. Women's NGOs have worked at most of these conferences to ensure that lan-

guage related to gender equality was included and then pushed at the Beijing Conference to ensure that previously-accepted language was also in the Platform for Action. One of the best examples is the Cairo Conference on Population and Development held in 1994 where women's groups were able to use non-ambiguous language which assured reproductive and sexual health rights that were significantly better for women than any previous international agreement (Germain and Kyte). Using the Cairo consensus, women's groups pushed for inclusion of the same language or even better language in Beijing. They

While both documents address women's equality before the law and in practice, their legal literacy—that is, their knowledge of women's rights and the laws that affect them—and the elimination of discrimination based on sex, the Platform for Action places women's rights in the context of all human rights. This gives greater credibility to women's rights and prevents them from being marginalized by the human rights community. In Beijing, there was for the first time, discussion about including the rights of lesbians and sexual orientation. While these were not adopted in the text, the discussion showed more support for their inclusion than had ever been present before. The Platform for Action also includes a much more developed section on violence against women, illustrating the range of violence against women from personal to state violence. This was linked to the 1994 adoption by the United Nations of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The Platform also integrates multiply-disadvantaged women throughout the text, where the FLS had given each group a separate section. This illustrates how there are many issues in common and how some women have particular needs and concerns as a result of class, race, disabilities, age, economic status, etc. Yet the Platform at times still provides a list of those with problems rather detailing their particular concerns (Paragraph 116).

In at least one area, the Platform is weaker than the Forward-Looking Strategies—its consideration of women and peace. The FLS provided significant analysis and addressed many areas to a holistic consideration of peace. Many women's peace activists have argued that much more could be said. But few anticipated, I am sure, that even less would be said in the Platform for Action. In the Platform the priority area is called "women and armed conflict" even though it addresses issues like the culture of peace, women in peace decision-making and the like. But the contents of this section provide much less than the FLS did for considering women's contributions to peace-making.

The Platform was intended to outline priority areas for urgent action. Yet there are few measures included to ensure that governments will implement this document. Few deadlines were given except that it is all to be in force by the year 2000. While enforcement is a problem for international law more generally, the lack of enforcement gives women's groups less leverage to ensure these promises are kept.

Finally, the Platform for Action has raised some new areas for consideration, indicating that its drafters have learned from experience. First, there is language through-



Participants at the NGO Forum in Huairou, 1995.

Photo: Marion Lynn

were able to hold on to the Cairo language in the Platform for Action, in some cases word for word.

Assessing the Platform for Action

The Platform for Action is very similar and very different from the earlier women's documents. First and foremost, it is a document agreed to by the governments of the world and illustrates commitments made by those governments to bring about specific changes in women's lives. It has been negotiated by many parties and the language reflects compromises. It is a "best effort," not the best ever, document.

There is a lot of overlap between the Platform for Action and the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies although the Platform addresses many issues using the knowledge gained over the ten years since Nairobi. The similarities are hardly surprising since the Platform was to help intensify work on specific areas in the FLS. One issue that was not very well developed in the FLS was the environment. In the Platform, the environment is one of the priority areas and receives considerable attention. This is clearly a result of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the work of many women's groups around the environment. Another shift is from equality in the FLS to the human rights of women in the Platform.

out the document on how gender-sensitive policies, analysis, and research are needed in all areas of government. The FLS had as one of its primary threads the participation of women in all decision-making processes. The Platform suggests that not only do women have to be involved in decision-making, but that all policy-making must include gender analysis. The Platform also includes an entire section on finances and funding arrangements. One of the lessons since Nairobi has been that governments may introduce legislation for change without giving the necessary resources to implement the changes. The Platform for Action thus suggests that governments should reallocate their own budget priorities and mobilize new resources to ensure adequate funds to implement the Platform for Action. The Platform has also introduced new language around sexual rights and health. This broadens the FLS which focuses primarily on women's reproductive rights and health. Sexual rights include the rights of women and men to decide and control their own sexuality.

Using the Platform for Action: where do we go from here?

The Platform for Action is in many ways yet another international agreement on women. It was agreed to by governments and it is up to governments to take action to ensure it is implemented. The promises governments have made have been rewritten, refined, and updated over the past 20 years and still little has changed for women around the world. Innumerable hours have been spent by government representatives, non-governmental organizations, women in their communities, and many others in writing, lobbying, and negotiating the text in these documents. If the same energy had been put into addressing these issues, we would see some significant change in women's lives.

Despite their failings, international agreements are very useful, critical even, to the work for change women's groups are seeking. International agreements like the Forward-Looking Strategies and the Platform for Action are government commitments, promises they have already made. We do not need any more commitments. The FLS and PFA have been drafted with much input from the international women's community and reflect many of the goals of women working for change around the world. We need to use these documents to press for action. We have to push for fulfillment of these promises and—using the very words of governments—for action in bringing significant and positive change to women's lives.

Deborah Stienstra teaches politics and women's studies at the University of Winnipeg and is active in community-based work encouraging Canadian governments to implement their international commitments on women.

¹Structural adjustment programs, often called "restructuring" in the North, have been put into place to assist countries get out of debt. They are all very similar and

include measures to reduce government spending, especially in the areas of health, social services, and education, by privatizing state-owned businesses, adjusting interest and currency rates, raising the prices of basics like food or grain, shifting the economy to producing goods primarily for export and others.

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