

Socialist International Women (SIW)

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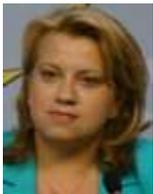
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Introduction

In March 2015, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women is to review and appraise the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) and the outcomes of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly (2000).

Conscious of women's irreplaceable contribution to the well-being of their societies, thousands of people of every background and of every opinion gathered together in Beijing twenty years ago to plan the route to a better world, a fairer world in which women and girls would have the same opportunities as men. The Declaration highlighted the greatest challenges to equality of the sexes and laid down a programme of action for meeting them. A UN Platform for Action was thus developed and unanimously adopted by 189 governments. Twelve critical areas of concern to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment were identified as requiring attention:

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women;
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training;
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services;
4. Violence against women;
5. The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation;
6. Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources;
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels;
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
9. Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women;
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media;
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

The Beijing Platform clearly stated that *“The success of the Platform for Action will require a strong commitment on the part of Governments, international organizations and institutions at all levels. It will also require adequate mobilization of resources at the national and international levels as well as new and additional resources to the developing countries from all available funding mechanisms, including multilateral, bilateral and private sources for the advancement of women; financial resources to strengthen the capacity of national, sub-regional, regional and international institutions; a commitment to equal rights, equal responsibilities and equal opportunities and to the equal participation of women and men in all national, regional and international bodies and policy-making processes; and the establishment or strengthening of mechanisms at all levels for accountability to the world's women.”*

For each of these 12 critical areas of concern, the document laid out strategic goals and concrete measures to achieve them. Every five years since 1995 (in 2000, 2005 and 2010) wide-ranging national reviews have evaluated the progress achieved and the challenges or constraints encountered.

SIW highlights the successes achieved since the presentation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Alongside the initiatives and actions noted in E/RES/1990/15, in UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 and in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), there have been many positive developments. Two-thirds of the world's countries have outlawed domestic violence and 52 countries have explicitly made rape within marriage a crime. Today the chances that girls will be genitally mutilated are one third lower than they were 30 years ago. The number of girls who are receiving at least primary level education has increased and, though gradually, continues to do so. The number of people living in extreme poverty has also decreased dramatically in the past three decades, allowing millions of women to hope for a better future.

Yet SIW is also obliged to note that the two decades since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration have not seen satisfactory progress in every part of the world. Progress has been uneven both within and between countries, with notable differences between continents.

An assessment of the 20 years since Beijing was also heralded by the 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2014, dedicated to “Challenges and Achievements in the Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls”. Socialist International Women (SIW), which unites 162 organisations from all over the world, stated at this 58th Session of the CSW that “women are still considered vulnerable victims instead of being involved as agents of change. Although gender equality and empowerment have been erected as global priorities, millions of women and girls around the world continue to face inequality and strong social and legal discrimination.”

In 2015, millions of women around the world still do not have access to their fundamental rights, not even to the most basic, such as education, health, justice, resources, employment, etc. Millions of women are migrants, experiencing the worst kinds of violence during their migrations. Millions of women are excluded from public life, enjoy none of the rights of citizenship, and suffer violence. Custom is often opposed to law, influencing institutional policy. On average, across the world, parliaments have only one woman for every four men; nearly 35% of women encounter physical or sexual violence; and half of those affected by HIV/AIDS are women.

Today, twenty years on, the time has come for another appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. What progress has been made? What obstacles have been encountered? What are now the most urgent priorities? What tools and what resources are required to ensure that women’s rights become effective, and in particular to achieve gender equality in every field? These are the questions that countries were asked to respond to in their national reports.

Women and Poverty

Beijing highlighted the gender dimension of poverty and called on governments to make greater efforts to eradicate poverty, more particularly in rural areas. Different anti-poverty strategies have been attempted across the world, notably access to micro-credit, but nearly 1.5 billion people still live on less than one dollar a day, and the majority are women – so many, indeed, that one may speak of a “feminisation of poverty”.

Across the world, women earn on average barely 50% as much as men. Women’s work is as vitally important for family survival and well-being as is the reduction of violence within the family. Women’s poverty has negative consequences for their rights. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 23% of rural girls complete their primary education and are too often consigned to unpaid domestic labour.

Poverty strikes women more quickly simply by reason of their being women, especially when they are single, elderly, refugee or migrant. Women do not enjoy the same access as men to education, property, work or goods. One of the Beijing strategic objectives was to “review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty”.

Such strategies have been adopted all over the world. Angola, Cameroon, Madagascar, Mexico, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia and other countries have made women a priority target group in their national poverty-eradication programmes. Certain countries, such as Germany, Japan, Greece and Italy, have introduced special allowances for poor families headed by women.

Many countries have responded to their international commitments by amending legislation (constitution, laws and subordinate legislation) so as to protect women’s rights, to promote gender equality and to afford women access to resources, but these provisions have remained without effect for lack of real political will.

Poverty and rights are inextricably linked. Conquering poverty requires a sustained political will.

Women and Education

Education stood at the heart of the questions raised in Beijing in 1995 and was central to the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, which called for universal primary education and for the reduction of the gender gap in secondary and higher education. On this front, there has certainly been progress. Enrolment in primary education in the developing world has reached 89% and girls are almost as likely to attend as boys. If gender parity in primary education has been reached, overall, there remain significant gender gaps and rates of school attendance remain very low in such poor countries such as Afghanistan, Mali, the Central African Republic and Chad. Girls' school attendance is falling in much of sub-Saharan Africa and Western and Southern Asia.

Globally speaking, nearly 776 million adults are non-literate, two-thirds of them women. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), in March 2014 100 million young women in poor countries were non-literate. In 2014, 31 million girls were still not enrolled in school and more than 15 million of them never will be.

The Global Campaign for Education report on "Gender Discrimination in Education" records that girls suffer from gender discrimination from the age of seven: one schoolgirl in ten (10%) says she is "unhappy being a girl", this figure doubling in secondary school (20%).

This situation has negative effects on poverty rates, health, infantile mortality and the frequency of early marriage. The rate of non-literacy among adult women has remained more or less unchanged for more than 20 years. The latest *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* issued by UNESCO estimates that "The poorest young women in low and middle income countries will only achieve universal literacy by 2072" and that "An increase in the average educational attainment of a country's population by one year increases annual per capita GDP growth from 2% to 2.5%" (*Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, 2014).

Education and training are fundamental rights for both women and men, without which there can be neither growth nor progress.

Women and Health

In Beijing, Member States agreed to increase resources for women's health and to monitor developments in this field. Progress has been made over the last 20 years, but the WHO notes that "societies continue to fail to meet the health care needs of women at key moments of their lives, particularly in their adolescent years and in older age", and this is throughout the world (*Women and Health: Today's Evidence, Tomorrow's Agenda*, WHO Report, 2009).

In certain regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women biologically capable of living longer than men run the risk of maternal mortality and ill-health. In developed countries, the risk is 1 in 4,300. In Afghanistan, the estimated lifetime risk is 1 in 11.

In developing countries, the most common cause of death among young women between 15 and 19 is complications with premature birth. HIV/AIDS too is a major threat, which in 2011 saw some 600,000 young women newly infected out of a total infected population of 34 million. Furthermore, most of women's health problems have their origin in childhood.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), around 800 women die every day from complications of pregnancy or childbirth. In 2013, 289,000 women died during or after pregnancy or childbirth. The majority of these deaths occurred in low-income countries and most of them could have been avoided. The rate of maternal mortality in developing countries is 230 per 100,000 births, as against 16 per 100,000 in developed countries. There are also great disparities within countries: between low-income and high-income populations and between rural and urban. If the last decade has seen an increase in the availability of antenatal care in many parts of the world, only 46% of women in low-income countries benefit from the assistance of qualified personnel during childbirth. Millions of births thus take place without the assistance of a midwife, doctor or qualified nurse.

Women's right to control their own sexuality and to access the necessary services depends upon an equality of the sexes that is not always recognised even in highly developed parts of the world. In Europe, women's freedom over their sexual and reproductive rights is characterised by difficulties and disparities within countries and between countries (The Human Rights of Women, European Women's Lobby, EWL: www.womenlobby.org).

"Improving women's health" reduces poverty, helps prolong school attendance, empowers women, improves the survival of women and children, increases resistance to infectious disease and preserves resources. In doing so, it contributes to social progress and equilibrium.

Violence Against Women

One of the greatest violations of fundamental rights is violence against women. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 defines it as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

Women and girls encounter particular forms of violence in certain countries. An example is the genital mutilation suffered by women in Africa and the Middle East, which affects some 140 million girls and women across the world. Another is represented by traditions of early marriage that survive in Africa, South and Central Asia and the Middle East. South Asia still sees young wives commit suicide as a consequence of violent treatment at the hands of husbands or in-laws in connection with matters of dowry or dishonour. In over 50 countries there is no legal protection for women against domestic violence. Almost 300,000 women and girls died in 2013 from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth (Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 2014: <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2014/12/oped-ohchr>). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has estimated that in 2012 half the women killed in the world were killed by their husbands or their husband's family.

Women and girls represent 55% of the 20.9 million victims of forced labour across the world, and 98% of the 4.5 million subject to sexual exploitation. In certain parts, migrant women suffer violence at their work and are unable to seek protection as a result of national legislation that uses *kafala*, a system that has its origins in slavery. According to the ILO, "With more than 250,000 domestic workers in Lebanon—mostly from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines—this system doesn't only subjugate women to a kind of tacit bondage, but it also empowers perpetrators of sexual violence and forced prostitution" (<http://www.ilo.org/beirut/countries/lebanon/lang--en/index.htm>).

According to the WHO, violence against women remains at an "unacceptable" level. In a series of articles published in medical journal *The Lancet*, it reveals that one in three women, globally, has experienced domestic violence. Across the world, between 100 and 140 million women and girls have suffered genital mutilation, 70 million girls have married before the age of 18, often against their will, while women's

lifetime risk of rape is 7%, say the authors. This violence, which “conflict and other humanitarian crises may also exacerbate”, has very serious consequences for victims’ physical and mental health (*Women and Health: Today's Evidence, Tomorrow's Agenda*, WHO Report 2009, http://www.who.int/gender/women_health_report/en/).

Even women in the most highly developed countries do not escape violence. In 2014, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights revealed the results of a large-scale survey of sexual, physical and psychological violence against women carried out in 28 European countries. 13 million women had suffered physical violence during the 12 months before the interview; 3.7 million women had suffered sexual violence during the same period, that is, 2% of women aged between 18 and 74 in the EU. One woman in twenty had been raped since the age of 15. Nearly 12% of woman said that they had suffered some form of sexual abuse or incident with an adult before the age of 15, which corresponds to 21 million women in the EU.

Beijing saw Member States commit to taking systematic measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women; to condemn violence against women and refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women; and to enact and/or reinforce penal, civil, labour and administrative sanctions to punish and redress the wrongs done to women and girls subjected to any form of violence.

Ending violence against women is possible, but to achieve this the international community must act collectively to challenge the attitudes that underlie violence, oppression and inequality. Regional and international treaties have to be ratified and applied. Laws forbidding violence against women and providing effective sanctions must be implemented. More resources must be devoted to women’s health, education and well-being. Public awareness of the problem must be raised through traditional media, social media and other digital channels. Men and boys must be mobilised against violence by means of educational programmes. More support needs to be given to the survivors of violence and their families, including legal assistance, psychological support and medical care.

In many countries, ending violence against women involves changing ways of thinking that still see women as inferior to men or as sexual objects or instruments of reproduction. As well as policy measures, involvement of the wider general public is also essential and particularly the involvement of men, as these are not just issues for women, these are human rights issues. Violence towards women and attitudes which denigrate and subjugate women are learned behaviours which can be changed. Socialist International Women welcomes movements such as the HeForShe Solidarity Movement for Gender Equality which encourages men to commit to take action against all forms of violence and discrimination faced by women and girls.

Violence is often the result of gender inequalities and contributes to their reproduction. Eliminating violence is essential for the harmonious development of societies and contributes to the empowerment of women, whatever their background.

Women and Armed Conflict

“Peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men and development. Armed and other types of conflicts and terrorism and hostage-taking still persist in many parts of the world. Aggression, foreign occupation, ethnic and other types of conflicts are an ongoing reality affecting women and men in nearly every region” (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995). A statement that could have been made in 2015!

If a century ago 90% of those who died in war were soldiers or other military personnel, it is estimated today that 90% of those who die as a result of armed conflict are civilians, most of them women and

children. Rape, murder and sexual slavery are often used as military tactics. When women are not victims of war, they support their families through periods of conflict.

The Beijing Declaration of 1995 invited governments to attend to this issue and to increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels, for women are always absent from peace negotiations.

The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2122 on women, peace and security. Women's participation is essential in the prevention of conflict and protection of victims. The resolution establishes a clear link between gender equality and international peace and security. It reiterates the demand that greater attention be paid to women's leadership in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and again calls for an end to the impunity of those responsible for violence against women in time of conflict.

The effective implementation of these provisions would afford a necessary measure of protection to women at a time of proliferating conflict.

Women and the Economy

The Beijing goal of more equitable participation in the economy has certainly not been attained. Women do two-thirds of all work across the world, especially in agriculture, in which they put in more hours than men on account of their unpaid domestic responsibilities. Women now hold 40 per cent of non-agricultural wage-earning jobs, but in every developing region these jobs are less secure and have few social benefits (Resolution on the Millennium Development Goals and Post-2015 Development Agenda, SIW Council, Istanbul, Turkey, 8 - 9 November 2013). But they remain highly disadvantaged on the job market whatever their experience or educational attainment.

Over the last 30 years, 552 million women have entered the jobs market and 4 workers out of 10 are women, yet they earn on average 80% of what men do (*World Bank Report 2012*). Men's average pay is higher than women's in both urban and rural areas. In the Middle East and North Africa, women's pay is around 30% of men's; in Latin America and Southern Asia, around 40%; in sub-Saharan Africa, around 50%; in East Asia and in developed countries generally, it is between 60 and 70%. According to *Building Gender Balanced Businesses*, in the United States women take 80% of decisions about the purchase of consumer goods; in Canada, women accounted for 70% of new business start-ups in 2004; in the United Kingdom, 60% of personal assets will be in women's hands by 2025; and at the global level, there are more women than men millionaires aged between 18 and 44.

Immigrant women are very often more disadvantaged, whatever their skills or educational attainments, which are devalued on the jobs market. Given the prevalence of xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes, they accept badly paid jobs in order to support their families. Furthermore, while the unemployment rate among European women is 10%, among non-European women it is 19% (Source: La Voix des femmes, *Le Livre blanc de la femme migrante*, published in May 2008, http://www.lavoixdesfemmes.org/web/IMG/pdf/_4_livre_WEB.pdf). The number of such immigrant women is increasing rapidly, for a variety of reasons (poverty, conflict, global warming...), ILO statistics published in May 2014 putting it at 111 million. The protection of migrant women's rights is a matter of global concern (Source: SIW International Migrants Day Statement, 18 December 2014).

Anti-sexist measures affording women access to assets, credit and property rights can catalyse economic growth in societies all over the world. But only women, through their participation in decision-making, can propose and win such measures.

Investment in the egalitarian economic participation of women and girls represents a concrete step towards an inclusive growth that strengthens social cohesion.

Women in Power and Decision-Making

Two objectives were adopted in Beijing: to “take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making”, including positive action, and to “increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership”, e.g. by developing their skills.

Results since 1995 have been encouraging but remain marked by great regional disparities. In 1995, “11.3% of parliamentary seats were held by women. Fifteen years later, women represented 19% of parliamentarians, a rise of a little more than 8% between 1998 and 2009. In 2014, they represented 21.8% of members of parliament, upper and lower houses together” (Electronic Journal Adéquations, 9 February 2015, <http://www.adequations.org/spip.php?article363>).

In the Scandinavian countries, 42% of parliamentarians are women as against only 14.9 % in the Arab countries. Some African countries stand at the head of the list, Rwanda and South Africa with 56.3% and 42.3% respectively. The figure for Sweden is 44.7%. In 2010, of 192 heads of government, only 11 were women. Globally, only 16% of ministers are women, Finland standing out in this respect, with 63% of ministerial portfolios being held by women.

The adoption of gender quotas has led to an increase in the number of women elected as representatives at all levels, from village councils to national parliaments. In India, certain states have raised the quota for women in their legislative assemblies from 30% to 50 %. In Albania, parity between women and men is guaranteed by law. In Canada, women’s participation in political life increased by 50% between 1995 and 1997. Finland has now established a 40/60 quota for governmental decision-making bodies. Ghana too ensures that women have 40% of seats in decision-making bodies. In Cameroon, El Salvador, Nigeria, Paraguay and the Seychelles, women have created their own political networks, bringing together local organisations, feminist movements and elected representatives.

There are currently 36 countries where 30% or more of ministers are women, which represents an encouraging increase from 2012, when there were only 26. Women ministers’ responsibilities are also growing more diverse, covering a wider range of areas. Education, social affairs and women are still the portfolios most frequently held, but there are also female ministers of defence, foreign affairs, and the environment. On the whole, it is in the Americas, Europe and Africa that the greatest changes have been seen, while the Arab countries, Asia and the Pacific are making slower progress. Yet if sexism seems to be gradually disappearing from politics, much remains to be done. Women are still under-represented in the institutions of government, whether legislative or executive. In certain regions, such as Eastern Europe, the advent of the market economy and free parliamentary elections saw a fall in the percentage of women in parliament.

The economic challenges many countries are facing has also impacted on the advancement of women in politics. The issues of women and gender discrimination are often relegated to a lower priority while the majority of focus is given to economic improvement. In addition, women are more likely to take low paid roles with long hours to help support the family financially, while still providing unpaid child rearing, social replenishment and house management functions. This leaves many women with little time or thought left over to become involved in political activities. This means that not only do women lose their political voice and ability to influence policies and legislation; the wider political community also loses the value of their contribution and perspective.

The representation of women in the institutions of government, both legislative and executive, is essential to securing and preserving their rights. It is a necessity for all societies committed to the achievement and consolidation of democratic advances.

Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

Beijing called on governments to take the measures necessary for the creation or reinforcement of national machineries for the advancement of women. Almost all countries have put in place institutional structures such as ministries, agencies, councils, offices or commissions in order to promote women's rights and increase their decision-making power.

Many countries have created or strengthened their major institutional mechanisms, making it possible to promote women's rights through the implementation of national action plans benefitting from the assistance of international organisations, notably the organs of the United Nations.

Africa offers a fine example. The African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SGDEA) adopted at 3rd Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government at Addis Ababa in July 2004, "strengthens African ownership of the gender equality agenda and keeps the issues alive at the highest political level in Africa." (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Recent Trends in National Mechanisms for Gender Equality in Africa, <http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/publications/report-cwd.pdf>).

Several African countries have established structures of different kinds (ministries, councils, departments, offices...), among them Algeria, Angola, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Malawi, Mali, Lesotho, Madagascar, Morocco, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Yet if these kinds of bodies seem to operate effectively in developed countries, they do not do so in certain other regions where institutional mechanisms seem to exist only for the sake of international appearances. In reality, these mechanisms lack independence, being close to the executive, or housed within ministries dependent on the presidency or concerned with social development more generally. These institutions' mandates are not clearly defined, few of them evaluate public policy, fulfil an advocacy role or vet legislation to ensure respect for women's rights.

Institutional mechanisms at sub-regional, regional and international levels are the most important instruments for the achievement of the objectives laid down in the Beijing Platform for Action. Clarifying their roles and ensuring that they are really carried out has to be a priority.

Women's Human Rights

The Beijing Platform for Action required the world's governments to implement, in law and in practice, all human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The CEDAW is an international convention on women's rights but also a road-map for governments in their efforts to guarantee women's enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

All international human rights instruments, including the United Nations Charter, insist on the elimination of sexual discrimination. The CEDAW has been ratified by 188 countries, but only 105 of these have signed the optional protocol that gives women the possibility of submitting complaints regarding the violation of their human rights to an international body.

Twenty years after Beijing, not all its promises have been honoured by governments. There are more women in employment, there is gender parity in primary education, mortality rates are falling, and so on. Yet the gender discrimination defined by CEDAW as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex" continues to exist in every field (public life, job market, access to resources, domestic violence...). Nonetheless, most countries have taken steps to give effect to the rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Some have established mechanisms that assist women in ensuring that their rights are respected.

Some countries are not yet parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women or other international human rights instruments, others have entered reservations, while others again have failed to harmonise their national legislation with international norms. In these cases, it is evident that women do not enjoy equality. Women continue to encounter obstacles to their enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, by reason of their race, language, ethnic origin, culture, religion, status (as migrant, refugee, displaced person) and so on.

Women's civil rights are still infringed in many countries. Family law can still discriminate, in matters of divorce, inheritance, early marriage etc. Many countries, especially in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, do not allow women to pass on their nationality.

When women do not play a full role in public and political life, their absence leads to the infringement of their most elementary rights. Women's presence in the public sphere is the best way of guaranteeing them at least the most basic rights and freedoms when culture and tradition in certain countries refuse them rights such as those of property, inheritance, or control over their own bodies.

Women's presence at all levels of decision-making will promote respect for their human rights and fundamental freedoms, an integral part of universal human rights and an essential vehicle of democracy.

Women and the Media

The Beijing Platform for Action called on governments and funding providers to act so as to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication and to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

“The most extensive worldwide research on gender in news is the ‘Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) - Who makes the News?’ issued regularly and based on analysis of almost 13,000 news stories on television, radio and in print media.” This notes that there has been little progress since Beijing. “Expert opinion in the news is overwhelmingly male. Only 21% of news subjects – the people who are interviewed or whom the news is about – are female.” Some “argue that war is given added drama when reported on by a good-looking female journalist, while the presence of a woman journalist also presents a distraction from the horror of the events themselves.” Few important topics are covered by women. This absence of women is a powerful stereotype in itself. And the last three decades have also seen a multiplication of sexist and pornographic images of women in the media. (Study by the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures for the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on “Equality of Opportunities”, November 2006, http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/women/docs/alf_0406_fr.pdf).

In its *Gender Review of National MDG Reports 2005*, the UNDP noted that “Negative portrayals of women in the popular media and media insensitivity to women's rights have been identified as major impediments to gender equality in many countries by governments and civil society groups alike.”

Sexist stereotypes are more difficult to dislodge when perpetuated by the media. They have negative consequences at every level, especially in developing countries or in countries where tradition weighs heavily on society. There it seems that men alone can or should shoulder political, economic or religious responsibilities, while domestic and social responsibilities fall to women. The distribution of tasks and resources remains unequal.

The media must abandon their sexist tendencies and play a more significant role in raising public awareness of the question of gender equality.

Women and the Environment

The Beijing Platform also has a section on women and the environment. Already in 1995, it raised the question of the impact of global warming on women and men alike, a question that is today one of the world's highest priorities. In every part of the world, in every culture, women stand at the heart of environmental issues. They depend on natural resources for food, heat and housing. "In the developing world, it is women who are generally responsible for the management of family resources. They spend a great deal of time in drawing and storing water and obtaining fuel, food and fodder, as well as working the land, whether forest, wetland or cultivated plots" (United States Department of State, Bureau of International Information Programs, Women Across the World, 2012, [http://photos.state.gov/libraries/ars-paris/206200/PUB/pub_women edition.pdf](http://photos.state.gov/libraries/ars-paris/206200/PUB/pub_women%20edition.pdf)).

Despite the appointment of women environment ministers and the steps taken in certain countries to integrate gender indicators into environmental policy-making, women are very little involved in environmental policy even though it is recognised that there cannot be sustainable development without the full participation of women. Women are central to sustainable development issues. The struggle against poverty, which requires the eradication of all discrimination, is an integral element of any environmental protection strategy.

At the UN Climate Change Conference held in Durban in 2011 it was agreed to take stronger action to control climate change, including greenhouse gases. Climate change has damaging effects on poor countries, the first to suffer the consequences, especially for women, girls and infants: drought, flood, famine and epidemic disease.

In sub-Saharan Africa, only around half of all households live within 15 minutes of the nearest water source. Women and girls are the first victims of problems of drinking water or lack of sanitation, and it is in involving them that this resource can be best protected. The good governance of sustainable development requires women's participation and gender equality in all fields of environmental action, notably water and sanitation, pollution and climate change (Source: CSO Forum Declaration, Addis Ababa, 15 - 16 November, 2014, http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Beijing-plus-20/africa_cso_position_statement_-_beijing20_final.pdf).

Only environmental policies that involve women and ensure their access to knowledge, decision-making and resources can mitigate the impact of climate change.

The Girl Child

Devoted to "challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls", the 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women looked at progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. One of the most important outcomes of the session was [the recognition of] the interrelations between gender equality, women's empowerment, violence and development. The Beijing Platform for Action called for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against and mistreatment of the girl-child, and for the protection of her rights. The situation has improved since 1995, but much remain to be done to protect the rights of girls, who in many parts of the world have a lower status than boys.

All across the world, girls remain vulnerable in certain societies despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. Discrimination varies by geographical region and cultural context. In East and South Asia, selective abortion and infanticide on gender grounds are still practiced. In China, the incidence of [pre-natal] sex selection and the abandonment of female infants has risen dramatically since the introduction of the one-child policy in 1989.

“100 to 140 million women and girls have undergone genital mutilation and at least 3 million girls are at risk of the practice every year. Most cases occur in regions of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.” The WHO estimates that 120 million women and girls are affected in Africa, one third of the continent’s female population. In Egypt, it is estimated that 75 percent of girls between 15 and 17 years of age have undergone genital mutilation, a practice which has immediate and long-term negative consequences on girls and women’s health and well-being, and complications can be fatal. Some countries in Africa, Europe and North America have banned genital mutilation; nevertheless, the practice continues (Quotes from *Global Women’s Issues: Women in the World Today*, US Department of State, Bureau of International Information Programs, 2012).

“In Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger more than 60 percent of women married before 18 years of age. In India, 47 percent of women married before 18 years of age. In Yemen, more than 25 percent of girls marry before 15 years of age” (*Global Women’s Issues: Women in the World Today*, US Department of State, Bureau of International Information Programs, 2002) In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more than 40 percent of girls marry before 18 years of age. This figure reaches 60 percent in certain parts of East and West Africa, three quarters of all girls marrying before age 18 in Niger. Early marriages should be prohibited in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24.3 of which provides that “States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.”

Education is essential for girls’ full development, and also delays marriage. Yet it was estimated in 2007 that 101 million children across the world, the majority of them girls, did not attend primary school (UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/french/protection/index_earlymarriage.html).

There are also other forms of violence that threaten children in general and girls in particular. An example is the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in North-Eastern Nigeria in 2014. Another is the recruitment of “a great number of children” by “armed groups” in Iraq. These boys and girls, some of them disabled, are used as combatants, suicide bombers or human shields. They also suffer sexual abuse and torture. They are “used as suicide bombers, including children with disabilities or who were sold to armed groups by their families” (Commission on the Rights of the Child, press conference, 4 February 2015).

These matters require urgent attention. The UN’s Safer Cities Programme and the Safe Schools Initiative launched at the World Economic Forum on Africa held in Nigeria, in response to the kidnapping of 200 girls, are actions to be promoted and extended to meet the challenges that so severely afflict certain parts of the world (Niger, Iraq, Syria...). Thousands of women have spent more than half a century hoping for some recognition of their rights. Now they have lost everything and hope for no more than to save their own lives, and those of their children.

Conclusion

Numerous imbalances continue to exist between men and women and these are “often related to difficulties in the exercise of women’s human rights and lack of capacity for the implementation of the international conventions, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)”. Legal discrimination between men and women represents the chief obstacle to sustainable development, inclusive economic growth, and peace. More must be done to reflect on the obstacles and to draw the lessons of the MDG programme for post-2015 and those of Beijing+20 for the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment (Source: Resolution on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action - 20 Years Later, SIW Council, Mexico, 26-27 June 2014).

The effort to end discrimination and violence against all women and girls without exception and to combat stereotypes has to take into account key factors, such as questions of culture. For many countries present in Beijing in 1995, this meant bringing about a revolution if women were to be granted all their

rights, including the right to take their own decisions about their own lives and bodies. Culture has been under-estimated as a factor in change and in national self-realisation. The forceful return of intolerance and obscurantism, of unenlightened tradition, and of the non-recognition of the other and his or her rights is today fuelling tensions within nations, representing a cultural obstacle to living together in harmony.

Furthermore, the question of globalisation is also pertinent. The neo-liberal model is worrying, as poverty is increasing. Women and children are its first victims even as women remain the guardians of the values of solidarity. Economic models neglect women, and public policy fails to adopt a gender approach.

Overall, then, “there is the unequal sharing of family responsibilities and socio-economic positions; poverty still has a female face, and unequal pay for work of equal value is still prevalent. Education and training for women and girls is still not guaranteed and the lack of expansion of women's access to health care remains a concern. Then, violence against women continues, their protection in situations of armed conflict remains insufficient and finally, the decision-making process continues to be primarily in the hands of men in several areas, including politics, media and the environment.” (Source: Resolution on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – 20 Years Later, SIW Council, Mexico, 26-27 June 2014).

Recommendations

Socialist International Women urges all governments, member parties of Socialist International, the UN and NGO's to recommit to the framework and measures within the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and ensure urgent action on critical areas for change and to take action to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by *supporting* their integration into local and national frameworks and legislation; *creating* co-operative partnerships with government, NGO and women's groups to promote the visions and goals of BPA-1995; *promoting* the BPA-1995 agenda within political party policies and campaigns; *establishing* local measurement and evaluation frameworks to enable review of progress on critical issues. (Source: Resolution on Beijing+20, SIW Council, Geneva, 15-16 December 2014).

SIW recommends that the Beijing Platform for Action focuses on three key areas proposed at the 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2014 (CSW): the eradication of violence against women, eradication of poverty, education and training for women and girls.

SIW recommends focussing of four priorities for women's emancipation:

1/ Equality: this is not a utopia but the precondition of a fair and equal society.

2/ Women's participation in political decision-making: this is the precondition of a democratic society.

3/ The promotion of a culture of democracy, respect for rights, including those of women, and of tolerance, the foundations for living together in harmony.

4/ The equitable distribution of income and resources between nations and between men and women, in order to overcome global, regional and local imbalances and to prevent conflict, which is generally economic in essence.

SIW finally recommends that aid projects, nations, and international organisations, UN Women in particular, redouble their efforts in support of civil society in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, while having regard for both the objectives laid down and the autonomous decision-making of NGOs.