

Time to move forward

Thirty one years ago, the governments of the world made it their legal responsibility to ensure women's rights by signing into the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Fifteen years ago, the Beijing World Conference on Women adopted an ambitious plan of action towards gender equality. This Social Watch paper *Putting gender economics at the forefront* goes into print in coincidence with the review by the Commission on the Status of Women of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA). This occasional paper includes thematic reports showing women's experiences and analysis from civil society organizations from different regions and countries. It also includes the Social Watch's Gender Equity Index (GEI) plus statistical tables on specific gender issues and examines achievements and setbacks on the status of women and girls since 1995. The different articles, statements and figures highlight women's global struggle for gender equality and respect of their human rights and freedoms.

This paper demonstrates that, notwithstanding some advances since the Beijing Conference and the adoption of CEDAW, the UN member States still have not fully implemented their commitments to gender equity as an essential condition for sustainable economic and social development. Also, the evolution of the gender statistical indicators, along with the narratives included in this publication, prove that there is an evident gap between gender legislation and its implementation of actual policies.

Furthermore, the GEI uncovers a staggering wipe out of the economic gains made by women at the global level and the negative impact of the global financial crisis on them. They draw attention most specifically to the financial crisis as its effects are widespread and exacerbate already existing inequalities. They also highlight the gendered nature of the crisis and its effects on women and women-dependent economies. Moreover, as Elsa Duhagon points out in her article *Feminist Economics and the New Development Paradigm* included here, social policies and state involvement are of vital importance in times of crisis since social indicators take twice as long as the economic ones to recover, while many people are left by the wayside. This means that human capital is lost, and that the equation "when the economy recovers, the social indicators will recover" is not valid. A change must come in economic theory and this must be reflected in practice. It is not a question of aiming for growth and formulating some policies for women, but of designing and implementing a new development paradigm with equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone without any kind of discrimination whatsoever.

The needs of women and girls today go beyond advancing the Beijing Platform and implementing CEDAW to including a call for sustainable development that places human well being at the core of policy making. Regional fora such as the Asia Pacific NGO

Forum –included here– point out to the need for sub-regional economic integration processes and national development plans that rest on the principles and practices of ecological sustainability, food sovereignty, financial inclusion, universal social protection, economic solidarity and fair trade.

Despite advances across the globe in legislation geared towards gender equity and judicial processes it is important to note that all around the world the women's movement has expressed its disappointment with the fact that states are very quick to sign onto human rights instruments and endorse different policies at the international and regional levels but extremely slow in delivering on their commitments and implementing legislation. Women's NGOs in Africa met in November 2009 in The Gambia for the African regional conference on Beijing +15. Ms Norah Matovu Wing, Executive Director of The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) said "The change achieved in the political, social, economic status and situation of African women cannot be denied. However the concern is that those enjoying these benefits remain a minority."¹ And changes in the daily lives of women are few and far between specially for those living in rural areas and those who are forced to migrate within countries and abroad.

A quick overview

In Asia, Latin America, The Middle East, Africa and Europe women and women's movements have acknowledged the positive effect of international instruments on the lives of women and girls. They have underscored the ratification of CEDAW in all but eight countries as a positive step. Additionally, some countries have implemented national action plans to combat violence against women. Also, quotas or other affirmative measures were adopted to increase women's representation in political decision-making in a number of countries. Moreover, some countries took steps to improve health outcomes for women and girls and implement measures to reduce gender gaps in literacy and in primary and secondary education.

There is a diversity of challenges within geographic and ethnographic areas in each region and country and these obstacles must be taken into account when analyzing advances and setbacks in achievements related to women's status. In the Muslim world which is often portrayed as a single homogenous region, despite the common culture, there is a marked difference between countries as to the extent of the achievements of the platform for action of Beijing. This difference can be traced back to several factors, including the position of every country from the interpretation of religious texts in relation to women which reflects clearly in the personal status laws and the responsibilities

¹ "African Women NGO Review Beijing +15", Foroyaa online, <www.foroyaa.gm/modules/news/article.php?storyid=3913>.

that they are allowed to exercise outside the boundaries of their home and family.

However, some regions are also registering increasing dynamics of religious extremism and/or right-wing conservatism that is linked to the perpetuation and propagation of discriminatory laws against women. A particular concern arising from the reports contained in this publication is the fact that many states and certain political parties resort to manipulating the right of people to cultural and religious diversity as a pretext for violating human rights, including the rights guaranteed to women, girls, HIV AIDS survivors, and persons with diverse sexual orientations.

Furthermore, political oppression of women and their rights is compounded by conflicts and an unbalanced focus on militarization as a form of security rather than human well being. Millions of dollars are spent across the world by governments of different political tendencies on “securing” their countries as basic needs of the most vulnerable and poor, many of whom are women and girls. As the article “Codifying Impunity” included in this publication shows, Burma’s 2008 Constitution provides a dangerous example of how militarization and political oppression threaten the future of women. This Constitution, approved in a referendum steeped in fraud and conducted in the disastrous aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, provides a glimpse of what Burmese women’s rights will look like after the 2010 elections. Burma’s lopsided militarization is but one extreme example of a global trend by states in prioritizing military spending at the detriment of essential social services upon which many women rely.

Across regions women emphasize the significant impact of the current economic and financial crisis on women. The economic position of women at the start of the global recession was by no means equal to that of men. And state responses to this crisis have focused on male dominated sectors like the car industry and the construction sector. In Latin America and the Caribbean very few of the measures taken by the countries to confront the crisis mention women, despite the fact that its impact is greater on them, with regard to both unemployment and the growth of precarious work, or access to jobs with lower

productivity and no social protection. In short, such measures do not call into question present forms of employment, or the relation between paid and unpaid labour. As a result of deficient, exclusive or even practically non-existent social protection systems, jobless people are not only poor but also marginalized; they are socially excluded and are pushed towards an informal or illegal economy. Women’s participation in the informal economy and in “voluntary” work has seen an increase as social protection measures are removed and their unemployment levels increase due to outmoded gender conceptions and the States’ effort to cut spending in public services – a sector where women tend to be employed – rather than guard the well being of their citizens in times of crisis. This has a doubly negative impact on women as it increases unemployment among them and increases the burden of unpaid care labour.

Variants of this phenomenon are visible in Africa and other regions in the developing world where the crises reached through various channels of transmission. And it’s become necessary to encompass a gender perspective during this crisis in order to decode situations within households, since people who share the same space maintain asymmetric relationships and authority systems tend to prevail.² Furthermore, despite current changes in roles, the division of labour by sex within households is still very rigid. The limitations placed on women by the division of labour by sex and the social hierarchies based on this division determine a socially unequal situation mainly within these three closely-linked systems: the labour market, the welfare or social protection system and the household.

However, the global economic crisis also provides an opportunity to debate and to improve the policies States undertake. This global recession is a time for historical transformation in which gender must have a central role. It is necessary to redefine macroeconomics and recognize that monetary economy rests on an extensive *care economy* in which the main work force is female. As the articles in this publication show the time has come for a new development paradigm with equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone. ■

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² Social Watch Research Team, Gender and poverty: a case of entwined inequalities, 2005.