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*Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, progress toward fulfilment of the Women's Action Platform is slow. The results of efforts by NGOs and women's and feminist movements in the Latin American and Caribbean region show that the changes are not those we dreamed of, and that what we thought we had conquered forever could easily vanish.*

There have been important advances related to the political rights of women, but not to economic, social or cultural rights. The importance of these latter rights continues to be underestimated in the entire region and for all nationalities. **The political advances are evident, measurable and demonstrable in laws and institutions. All countries in the region have legislation establishing equality between men and women. Among these, the laws on violence against women are of utmost importance. Likewise, in most countries there are affirmative action policies seeking to narrow the gap in political participation between men and women. All countries now have institutions and/or specific state mechanisms dedicated to advancing the political rights of women, and in many there are areas of co-ordination between civil society and the state.**

Despite this progress, initial enthusiasm about what could be done with the Platform has given way to a much less seductive reality, not only because of what has not been achieved, but also because of the loopholes in what has been achieved. Laws are not always enforced because there is lack of guarantees and lack of information. The formula of «intra-familial violence» is applied to legislation against violence, as if women were not always the principal victims of such violence.

State mechanisms remain weak and have lost status. Their future and reach come into question with every change of government. Generally, they lack funding, do not have transversal power, and are perceived as «minor» within the state apparatus. In many cases, these mechanisms serve the interests of the governing party more than they do the complex interests of women. This is aggravated by the fact that not all of these offices function on an «equal plane». This further weakens their influence on gender relations and on the content and scope of public policies on women.

## THE BEIJING BALANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

These state agencies also have to deal with permanent competition from other, extra-institutional agencies with a high degree of nepotism, such as the Offices of First Ladies, which dispute their functions and resources. And while some state mechanisms have had feminist women at their heads or in important positions (which has generally meant a focus on rights rather than vulnerability), the field of influence of these women has been limited and their presence ephemeral.

**Fulfilling some parts the Platform seems to be instrumental to some governments' political interests.** Progress is made on the less radical aspects of the Action Platform. In most countries, the absence of channels of consultation, dialogue and negotiation between the citizenship and the state has been a constant. There is also lack of transparency regarding the steps these governments have taken to implement the Platform. This has created serious obstacles to assuring effective citizen participation and demonstrates some worrying characteristics of the region. The democracies of our countries are weak, exclusive, have authoritarian traits, and function in a neoliberal context that has dramatically increased exclusion and poverty.

The Women's Action Platform is an essential tool that can only work if governments demonstrate the necessary political will. They must reorient the state toward democratic and humane alternatives to the neoliberal economic model, make application of the Platform transversal and integral, and commit to appropriate and sufficient distribution of resources at the highest political level. The women's and feminist movements must seek to make the Action Platform part of the Human and Civil Rights of Women, and therefore, as rights demanding a certain democratic climate. For these reasons, the women's and feminist movements who attended the VIII Regional Conference of Governments (ECLAC, February 2000) to evaluate the five years gone by since Beijing, continued to raise as the central demands of the region: Justice, Mechanisms and Resources, now explicitly adding what should be the global political orientation of any action related to the Action Platform: Democracy.

The Platform requires mechanisms, resources and multiple democratic processes not only at the national level. In a world that is more interdependent each day, connections, influences, and exchanges between the local and the global spheres are inevitable. They are also decisive in their ability to facilitate or obstruct the fulfilment of the Action Platform. Therefore, the

international arena, fundamental during the Beijing process, is another terrain on which to profile and defend women's and citizen's democratic rights.

For the Latin American and Caribbean region, the Beijing process meant «starting the motor» of a rich network of regional and international connections, built over a period of twenty years through multiple citizen interactions. Nourished by the periodical Feminist Encounters, the cumulative thematic meetings, the action networks, the campaigns, etc., there were initiatives to exchange experiences on strengthening movements and the democratic contexts in which they act, connecting diverse perspectives on similar problems, building national advocacy strategies, and extending Human Rights and Women's Citizen Rights. Through these activities, we women began to express ourselves as citizens on both the regional and global levels in proposals that transcended national frontiers.

Throughout the 1990s, women promoted legal action and lobbied to negotiate proposals and incorporate the documents into the discussion. By doing this, we created new articulations between citizens and the state, this time using the United Nations as our field of action. For feminists, the culminating event of this new dynamic process was the Beijing Conference, which became the point of concurrence of all that had been produced around women and democracy in the previous conferences and summits.

Despite the importance of this global space and the UN as a privileged institution within it, there has been relatively little analysis or discussion regarding the possibilities and restrictions that this path entails. Also lacking is analysis and discussion of how accelerated and dramatic changes in these last decades, which have profoundly modified socio-political, economic, personal and citizenship relationships, will affect the composition, objectives and structure of the UN.

An understanding of these changes allows us to perceive the ambivalence with which the UN today views progress toward the fulfilment of the Action Platform. Globalisation appears before us as a new scenario, transforming the economic process. It coincides in time with the dominance of the neoliberal project, which privileges the market and large corporate interests over the interests of citizens. Nation states are too small to address these global problems and, at the same time, too large to organise the multiplicity of local interests and identities. Globalisation also places us in other processes by generating –through progress in communications technology– a rich and unprecedented web of connections and articulations between local and global. This is the area of globalisation which allows us to think in a different way, as citizens not only of our nation states, but as citizens of Planet Earth, and to widen the field for a process of multiple democratisations, from the local to the global and back again.

***In this framework, the role of the United Nations may be enormously significant. Following the logic of states, the UN has attained rights not yet fully conquered, but already present on the reference horizon of societies. In so doing, the UN has widened the field for its visibility. This particularity of the UN brings it closer to the logic of citizenship.*** This particularity explains the reason for «themes» taken up by UN conferences and summits in the last decade. These are precisely the themes that were already on the horizon of society and democratic

citizenship. There was no interest, or mechanism, or legislation in the national states to address these themes, however, and their solutions are increasingly less national and more global (children rights, environment, human rights, population, development, women, besides specific conventions and agreements regarding sexual orientation, indigenous peoples, youth, and the disabled). The UN has thus contributed to profiling and raising a new global agenda.

Nevertheless, there is a paradox. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the objectives, structures, and power distribution of the UN are, in many ways, backward. The context in which it was born 50 years ago is no longer. Its member nations are themselves are no longer the same (although some are still as arrogant). Power dynamics are no longer the same. Globalisation has compromised many of its previous functions by modifying the context of their application. Nevertheless, ***the UN is possibly the only international space capable of responding to the new problems of a globalised world. The UN is possibly the only body that could regulate the power of states over its citizens and give guarantees, emanating from a still incipient global body of law, for the exercise of Human and Civil Rights.***

For this reason, it is necessary to re-create the UN, strengthening it to better respond to the new challenges of this millennium, drawing it closer to its citizens, and generating a larger body of regulations capable of protecting human rights. Mechanisms are needed to monitor its policies and make it follow up on its commitments. ***Bilateral agencies and institutions, institutions of global capitalism, transnationals and multinationals and governments—which have been untouchable until now—must be held accountable for what they have done and what they have failed to do to promote and guarantee the promises of the Women's Action Platform.*** Execution of the Platform is behind schedule, among other things, because internal and technical mechanisms directly related to the UN system are in fragile condition. And so, as Lucy Garrido says, «...with what authority can the UN agencies demand that governments create institutional mechanisms and assign them sufficient resources if it does not begin at home?»

It is urgent, as Giddens and many other authors point out, to achieve greater democratisation, better co-ordination, financial reform of the UN system and payment of debts owed by some countries to the UN. Also needed are: mechanisms to make transnational corporations socially and environmentally accountable; new sources of funding for international aid; and effective international legal structures.

***It is possible for the UN to change, to adapt itself to the new realities and contexts of this millennium from the perspective of citizens' as well as states' rights. This is our proposal.*** If implemented, it will contribute decisively to the democratisation, not only of global space, but also of each country. Fulfilment of human and citizen rights contained in the Action Platform is indissolubly tied to development and the enrichment of democracy.

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