

Gender Equality-Looking Back at Progress Since Beijing and Looking Forward to the SDGs¹

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The year 2015 marks the 20th anniversary since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was held in 1995, a conference during which the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were adopted.

The year 2015 also marks the adoption of the next set of global goals for development—the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, 2015 is a good time to reflect on progress made to advance gender equality since 1995 and look ahead to the work that still needs to be done under the new SDGs.

We should first look back at progress made since 1995. Over these past 20 years, tremendous progress had been made in the area of gender equality. Global progress is visible particularly in women's health, education, and legal rights. Women's access to health services started to improve. Access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels, particularly in primary education. Violence has become a priority issue at the global level, and numerous states adopted legal, policy and institutional frameworks to end violence against women. It is now recognized that elimination of violence against women in armed conflict is greatly significant to peacebuilding work, and more attention is paid to the promotion of women's human rights and mainstreaming gender perspectives in the context of armed conflict. Gender perspectives started to be included in the national plans and strategies on sustainable development and rural development.

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The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a conference that made history. This conference helped to advance the rights of women and girls all over the world.

In 1995, then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton made the famous statement that *“Women’s rights are human rights, and human rights are women’s rights.”* This statement stands today, stronger than ever before. In 2014, member states compiled reports on advances made toward achieving the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action. In 2015, these reports were discussed during the 59th session of the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women. At that session of the CSW, then Secretary of State Ms. Clinton noted: *“This report shows that progress is possible-and that more work remains.”* This observation is true of all nations.

Amongst the many positive changes that have taken place over the past two decades, we have seen the global average life expectancy of women rise from 69 years old in 1995 to 73 years old today. The rate of global maternal mortality dropped by 42 percent in the past twenty years, the mortality rate for infant girls dropped by half, and adolescent births were reduced by nearly one third.

In the sphere of education, many key achievements were made. The number of countries that have achieved the goal of gender parity in both primary and secondary education has risen from 36 to 62 since 2000. Although 62 million girls are still denied their basic right to education, the number of out-of-school girls has declined by 52 million in the last 15 years.³ More and more girls are being given access to education, not only bettering their own futures, but also improving the future of their families and societies.

Regarding legal protection and women’s rights, 56 countries’ constitutions have guaranteed women protection under the law since 1995. As of 2013, 76 countries had laws against domestic violence, compared to only 13 countries in 1995.

In China, the National People’s Congress is now considering a new national law on domestic violence⁴. I know from talking with gender experts in China that it was the 1995 conference in Beijing that first created awareness of the issue of domestic violence there. Following the conference, organizations began to take steps to address domestic violence and advocate for improved laws. Twenty years later, 29 of 31 provinces in China have enacted legislation to address domestic violence, and the national law is likely to pass next year.⁵ Many other countries have seen similar momentum to address and prevent domestic violence since the 4th World Conference on Women.

³ <http://en.unesco.org/news/less-half-countries-have-achieved-gender-parity-education>

⁴ China passed the national domestic violence law on 27 December 2015, and it came into effect on 1 March 2016

Since 1995, women are also now more represented in politics. Women globally hold 22 percent of the seats in national legislatures compared to only 12 percent twenty years ago. In other words, the percentage of women in parliaments around the world has almost doubled in these twenty years.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action highlighted women and the economy as one of the twelve critical areas of concern. Many economic doors have opened for women since Beijing 1995. Today, more women are scientists, engineers, doctors, and CEOs of companies, - holding jobs that were unthinkable in the past. Women have a vast positive impact on economy, in business, agriculture and industry. In OECD countries, the gender gap in labor force participation narrowed by 9% between 1990 and 2010. In 2010 65% of women were in the labor force, up from 58% in 1990.⁶ Outside of OECD countries, a greater decline in the labor force gender gap was observed in Central and South America, narrowing by more than 12%. However, progress in Asia was much more limited.

Women's role in peace and security is also a crucial gender issue that has seen key improvements. For millennia, rape has been widely used as a weapon of war in conflict. The change since 1995 is that this gross atrocity is no longer acceptable to the international community. The United Nations' Security Council has enacted a whole series of resolutions, starting with Resolution 1325, that call for the end of sexual violence as a war tactic, affirm the right of women to participate in peace processes, and require peace-keeping missions to respond to and prevent sexual violence. As a result, women are better represented in peace processes, perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict situations are being prosecuted under international law, and UN peacekeepers are being trained to handle cases of sexual violence.

Recently here in China, UN Women and the Peacekeeping Centre of the Ministry of National Defense held a successful training for its Peacekeeping Officers on the protection of civilians from sexual violence⁷. China and other nations have taken up the UN's call and are working to bring an end to such atrocities. Yet, despite all these crucial gains, much more work needs to be done. Let us look at the remaining gaps and how they relate to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Women's health is an important area where serious issues still persist, particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS, which is increasingly impacting women worldwide. This also relates to women having less opportunities in health education and the unequal power of women in sexual relationships. However, HIV transmission to women can also be a

⁵ See footnote 4

⁶ OECD Report from 2012: <http://www.oecd.org/employment/50423364.pdf>

⁷ UN Women and the Peacekeeping Center held their third peacekeeping workshop in June 2017.

result of gender-based violence. In Chinese society, we are still witnessing the prevalent stigma around this disease. UNAIDS published a report examining HIV related issues. In a survey, 87.3% of female respondents, about 10% more than male respondents, expressed their concern that if their disease is revealed, they will be frequently subjected to gossip that affects their societal status⁸.

There are other concerning health issues as well. In many countries, women still have limited access to maternal prenatal and infant care and risk complications during their pregnancies and childbirth. Around 830 women around the world still die every day from causes related to childbirth or pregnancy. This means one woman dies every two minutes. Particularly, the risk of maternal death per birth for adolescents in age from 15 to 19 is 28% higher than for women aged from 20 to 24. Therefore providing young mothers with proper care and assistance is vital. Even though great progress was made in achieving gender parity in education, overall girls still make up a higher percentage of out-of-school children than boys. Approximately one quarter of girls in the developing world do not attend school.

In terms of economic status, women are still a minority in the global economy where only 47 percent of women are in the formal workforce compared to 72 percent of men. Women's equal rights to capital and property ownership also lag behind men and need to be addressed, as more than 150 countries do not legally ensure capital and property rights for women.

Despite significant gains for women entering politics and governance, the fact is that only 22 percent of members of the world's parliaments are women, 8 percent shy of the 30 percent goal set by the Beijing conference in 1995. Perhaps we should also ask why the goal was not 50 percent?

Domestic violence remains an issue that is present all over the world. A staggering one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. In 2012, globally, one in two women who were killed were killed by their partners or family. In addition, 2.6 billion women and girls live in countries where marital rape is not explicitly criminalized.⁹

The Member States of the United Nations adopted the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, which define the objectives to eradicate poverty, protect the environment, and create a world free of discrimination and inequalities of all kinds by the year 2030. Achieving global gender equality is Goal Number Five.

⁸ http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2009/20091127_stigmaindexsummaryreport_en.pdf

⁹ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2015/11/infographic-violence-against-women>

Goal Five calls for five specific objectives:

- ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere;
- eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual violence, and other types of exploitation;
- eliminating harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic workers and the promotion of shared responsibility for household;
- ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; undertaking reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources; and
- adopting enforceable legislation for the achievement, rather than the promotion, of gender equality at all levels.

However, Goal Five does not and cannot stand alone. It has to be understood and addressed in the context of all other goals. All 17 goals are interrelated and interdependent. This is why the member states have agreed to mainstream gender throughout the other 16 goals. For example, eliminating the negative effects of climate change is a good example of a goal that is actually connected to gender equality, though not widely understood as such.

Women are generally more vulnerable to negative climate change impacts, such as natural disasters like typhoons, droughts and floods, because women are more highly dependent on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods. Moreover, due to their limited resources and capacity to adapt to climate change impacts, resulting from lower incomes, less access to financial resources like property rights, lower education on average, and the care burden that women shoulder, they are much less resilient on average when climate change impacts hit them and their families. Therefore, when considering policies on climate change, the world's leaders must consider how to address these gendered vulnerabilities.

This is only one example of how gender must be mainstreamed in another Sustainable Development Goal. In reality, none of the 17 goals can be fully achieved until decision-makers mainstream gender into them.

Looking back at 1995 and looking forward to the SDGs, there is another key change since 1995 that is rarely acknowledged, but quite crucial to achieving the SDGs and advancing gender equality in general. That change is the increasing number of men joining the effort for gender equality.

Globally, UN Women has been holding a campaign called HeForShe. UN Women is inviting men to become active participants and supporters of gender equality. If women's rights are human rights, then achieving gender equality affects men too, and it is now even more imperative to have not just women fighting for women, but have men join hands with them as well. Under the umbrella of HeForShe, some very high profile men have spoken out for women, including military generals, political leaders, leaders of multinational corporations, and celebrities. Aside from HeForShe, there is also the White Ribbon campaign, a global grassroots movement of men taking actions to stop violence

against women and girls.

Recently on September 27th, many world political leaders made public commitments to achieve gender equality. As Co-Chair of this meeting, China's President Xi Jinping made an historic speech at the UN, reiterating China's commitment to gender equality as one of its fundamental state principles and pledging to support gender equality efforts in developing countries. Altogether, 80 leaders from other countries made similar pledges at this ground-breaking meeting, hosted by UN Women. This was the first international meeting ever convened at which the world's leaders made specific commitments to gender equality.

The very next day after this meeting, the world's leaders approved the new Sustainable Development Goals. We now have a new momentum for gender equality that we cannot afford to lose. We have specific statements from many world leaders affirming their nations' commitments to advance gender equality, and we have the Sustainable Development Goals, which explicitly call for gender to be mainstreamed across all of its goals, in addition to a stand-alone goal on gender. And, most importantly, we have more and more men joining this cause. Now, the real work begins.

From the achievements that had been made since the conference in Beijing in 1995, we can clearly see that the momentum created by a landmark event like a global conference is crucial in furthering our efforts. We must build on the momentum created by the adoption of the SDGs and commitments made by world leaders.

Looking back at 1995, we can also see that the international momentum created by the conference helped to strengthen the women's movement in many countries. This was certainly the case in China. Many Chinese gender experts have spoken about the encouragement they received from their international sisters that resulted in the creation of new NGOs in China dedicated to gender issues and the recognition of gender issues, like domestic violence, that had previously remained unspoken. In fact, the 1995 conference had such a huge effect on Chinese society that for many years after the conference many Chinese people assumed that the term "NGO" referred to women's organizations.

Finally, the goals set by the Beijing Platform for Action provided tangible objectives toward which women's rights activists could hold their governments' accountable. Global experience shows that, without accountability, often very little gets accomplished, and that is another reason why we need to seize the opportunities presented by the SDGs and work collectively to ensure that gender is indeed mainstreamed across all of them.

Advocates for gender equality have to support and encourage each other and join in a collective effort to achieve gender equality. We should promise ourselves that we will continue with collective efforts towards gender equality, and that we will continue to support and encourage each other.