

**The Beijing Platform for Action Fifteen Years After:
Surviving Multilateral Dysfunctionality in a Fierce New World**
Statement at the 54th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women
Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era [DAWN]
March 2010, New York

When women from all over the world arrived in China for the historic 4th World Conference on Women in 1995, we optimistically imagined a new world where states, nations and societies would collectively recognize, cooperatively uphold and progressively expand women's human rights, development and our equality with men. The multilaterally negotiated Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) contained milestone commitments to the world's women, and we looked forward to a future where it was possible to end all forms of violence against women; women's poverty and our unequal share of caring work within and outside the home; as well as socio-cultural discrimination, sexual disciplining, and political exclusions of various categories of people, including women, transpeople (and men).

During both the Five-Year and Ten-Year Reviews of the BPFA and amidst growing disenchantment with the United Nations, DAWN decided to politically invest in advocating for the necessity – as well as negotiating the intricacies of – securing women's rights and entitlements won through the BPFA and other international conventions on human rights and social development. The decision was made in a context where these basic rights were being challenged, blurred, eroded or compromised in an institutional environment of intensifying tensions and multiple disagreements among the member states of the United Nations (see DAWN Informs, April 2000; DAWN Informs, May 2005 at www.dawnnet.org).

The uncertainties of inter-governmental negotiations within the United Nations reflect the multiple shifts, cracks and crises in global geopolitics and global governance of a run-away neoliberal globalization as well as a militarized and financialized political economy. DAWN recognizes the developing multilateral terrain as part of a **fierce new world** that is replete with huge threats and doubtful opportunities for women's rights and gender equality. Some current fault lines include:

- Developed countries that hold a grip on the Security Council continue to utilize their massive resources, including scaling up interventionist military might in order to impose their version of “good governance, democracy and human rights” on various parts of the South, and in the process creating environments for intra-state violence and suspension of Constitutional rights that have an adverse impact on the lives of ordinary people.
- There is turmoil in the Human Rights Council, with some countries insisting on narrow interpretations of cultural diversity, in particular, the right of states and groups to enjoy cultural rights in ways that compromise human rights guarantees, including women's human rights and sexual rights for all.
- Uneven processes of breakdown and fragmentation of secular nation states create spaces at the local and national levels where there has been consolidation of politically motivated fundamentalist and neo-conservative forces that lead to greater disciplining of bodies and revoking of reproductive and sexual rights especially of women. The repercussions of these fundamentalist and neo-conservative attacks play out in the lives of individuals facing human rights abuses, in governments and civil society spaces, and influence inter-governmental negotiations.

- A rise in philanthrocapitalism has led to big business and multinational corporations entering the United Nations in full force and often able to access inter-governmental negotiations far more easily than civil society. This leads to the proliferation of market-based rather than socially-oriented / people-centered policy proposals in inter-governmental negotiations such as what we saw in the recently failed Climate Change conference.
- The Bretton Woods Institutions, including the World Trade Organization, continue to exert pressure on the United Nations System in promoting a neo-liberal model of development in which women's rights and gender equality remain narrowed by efficiency considerations in support of profit accumulation.
- Fifteen years after Beijing and ICPD, human rights of lesbian and bisexual women and transpeople are at worst absent, and at best sidelined, from main CSW spaces. This is unacceptable in a forum meant to commemorate universality of women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. Meanwhile, large numbers of LBT women in the economic South continue to face grievous and intersectional forms of violence, discrimination and neglect from both state and nonstate actors.

The huge challenge that we have experienced in the last 15 years to ensure that the BPFA survives in the formal texts of the United Nations is symptomatic of the complex advocacy demanded by this fierce new world. We cannot be discouraged, but we cannot also be naively optimistic, including about the capacity and clarity of social movements. Women's movements have often felt let-down by no less than our colleagues and allies who at key moments, in admittedly confusing and complicated policy environments, have chosen pragmatic pathways leading to conformity, cooptation and exclusion or subversion of the women's rights agenda.

Nevertheless, there are possibilities and opportunities to be found ...

- Some regional formations and South-South cooperation ... have led to women-friendly social protection policies especially as part of anti-poverty programs among poor rural and urban women. Some of these policies are now being discussed as policy options in the United Nations System.
- Feminists and women's organizations, including DAWN, have progressively moved beyond exclusively women's rights spaces to reach across thematic areas and are trying to negotiate with male-led political organizations in working toward harmonizing agreements and negotiations around rights-based, equitable, and sustainable development.
- The economic and political hegemony of the global North in the post Cold War period is being challenged by new inter-country formations from the South, and while these have still to establish consistent credibility in support of women's rights, gender equality and sexual rights, negotiation spaces are now more fluid and open for advocacy and the development of alternatives. Regional processes within the multi-polar global system have come to be and are in dynamic tension with global processes in ways that open new spaces and ideas for alternative development policies and promotion of human rights although these also carry new risks and challenges.

In this complex and ambiguous multilateral space, DAWN sees the need for a renewed understanding of the changing United Nations culture and organization. Feminists and women's rights groups must become more attentive to differences in the nature and character of power relations among protagonists within as well as outside the United Nations. We should also examine how these impact on

democratic participation and consensus building that had been accessible to women's organizations, and strategically influence the dynamic process of struggle among forces and actors.

Concretely...

- We require more considered reflection that has been honed through actual advocacy and praxis in the midst of the call for a 5th global women's conference, given the multiple threats from a dysfunctional multilateral context and our internal weaknesses as women's movements. This is the time for an intensification of our fight for resisting failed policies and programs, defending and expanding our rights as well as re-claiming the United Nations as our rightful space. We must make every effort to ensure that if and when another women's conference is convened that it becomes a moment of renewed energies rather than a watershed where hard won gains in women's rights and gender equality are completely compromised.
- We need caution and wisdom in proceeding with the gender architecture at the UN. Fast tracking the gender architecture has its merits and demerits, especially if pursued without a comprehensive understanding of how development itself is now fiercely debated in the United Nations. As we call for the gender architecture to be put in place, we need to carefully weigh our risks and gains, and be smart in moving with and through the political deal-making among Member States.
- We need to undertake a serious and concerted review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the women's movements through the lens of women's rights and gender equality. In September this year, we need to challenge the ways in which the focus on MDGS has deflected attention away from restructuring the global governance system for the realization of women's rights and gender equality at local, national, regional and global levels. Let us stop using the MDGs as a cosmetic cover-up to the little that countries are willing to give toward the realization of rights-based sustainable and equitable development.

**Women's movements and feminist activism will carry us through the fierce new world.
There Must Be Alternatives!**

**Let us critically engage with the UN as we move away from failed institutions and policies
toward a new Global Development Architecture!**

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