

**United Nations
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Expert Consultation on Regional Perspectives in the
Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the
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**Beijing PFA: Looking Back, Looking Forward:
A Perspective from Asia**

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** The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

ACHIEVEMENTS

One major feature of the last decade has been the enormous expansion of space for women and for women's issues – one sees it in the visible presence of women in every sphere and in the formal recognition of the legitimacy of women's claim to equality.

In the years since Beijing, women's organisations in Asia have created, expanded and protected this space – they have come together in larger and more inclusive formations to claim their rights and raise difficult and controversial issues that go beyond purely national perspectives. For instance, if India and Pakistan are sitting down to talk to each other today, a part of the credit should certainly go to the women's peace movement in South Asia which has been working towards this for twenty years.

GAPS

But despite these gains, there are some serious gaps. I would like to highlight four gaps which in my opinion demand urgent and decisive action.

First is the resource gap. In all our countries, the share of resources flowing to women is far below their legitimate entitlements. This is confirmed by gender analyses of budgets – whether it is resource allocations for women-specific programmes like women's health and women's education, or whether it is resources flowing to sectors like water and sanitation, which are vital to women's lives, we are seeing a steady and definite decline.

Second is the institutional gap. Even though women's departments and bureaux have been put in place, they are often understaffed and under-resourced and have a very limited sphere of influence. We have women in institutions, but we are still far from our goal of “making institutions right for women.”

Third is the policy gap. Yes, we have policies for women's empowerment and National Action Plans for women. But macro-economic policies, fiscal policies, trade policies, foreign policy still continue to be made and implemented in the context of a mythical “average citizen” – they continue to ignore the reality of women's lives and the reality of gender inequality.

Fourth is what I call the growth gap. Many of the countries in our region are seeing enormous acceleration in economic growth. India for instance has broken the barrier of the “Hindu rate of growth” and is seeing a boom in sectors like IT. But there is also a simultaneous increase in women's poverty. Jobs are being created, but for the vast majority, they are low-paid and insecure jobs in the informal sector, which is inherently exploitative. Also, despite our emergence as an “IT superpower” of sorts, India is still an agricultural economy – more than 70% of our women workers are agricultural workers. The crisis of stagnation and underinvestment in agriculture has pushed these women out of work and onto the streets of our big cities, where they literally live on the edge of survival.

STRATEGIES

Essentially, strategies to address all the above gaps must focus on bringing gender issues into debates and decision-making in 'hard' sectors. It is a process of asking some hard questions – “Where is the money? Where is the justice? Where are the women?” - in the context of national budgets, national economic policies, negotiations with multilateral financial institutions, trade negotiations.

This is a complement to the other strategy of transforming institutions to 'make them right for women'. The last decade has taught us that merely inserting women into mainstream institutions, or creating a women's department into a bureaucracy that continues to function as it always did, has only limited impact. We now have to look critically and honestly at the impact of women's machineries and of measures like reservations in institutions of governance and to act on the findings of these reviews.

CHALLENGES

But I want to underline the point that the way in which strategies are designed and will operate is bounded and moulded by some larger processes.

The most forceful of these processes today is a resurgence of patriarchy which seems to have reinvented itself in a contemporary and compelling form.

In India for instance, the decline in the sex ratio and the millions of “missing women” are indicators of the patriarchal resurgence. Violence against women has “gone public” – whether it is honour killings in Pakistan, sex selective abortions or death sentences awarded to young lovers from different communities by caste councils in India, it is only women's groups who are protesting – the public and institutional response to these trends is very minimal.

The quality and direction of economic growth is another factor behind the resurgence of patriarchy. The expansion of markets has translated into an increase in consumption of goods, but market forces have also helped to reduce women to either consumers or consumed, commodities and objects for sale and exchange.

The affirmation of supposedly “cultural” values, which prescribe and valorise traditional roles for women, has also been welcomed and supported by market forces. Mainstream TV channels in India which are major vehicles of Indian cultural imperialism and have a huge influence in all the countries of the subcontinent, promote and glamorise the notion of the “good” woman” in ways that denigrate, devalue or attack women who seek to assert their rights or claim a space in the public domain.

The map of our region is blotched with long standing conflicts within and between nation-states and within and between communities. Apart from their direct impacts on women, these conflict have also proved to be vehicles for a “militarisation of the mind” – a mindset that sees violence as a valid way to resolve disputes, and violence against women as a valid means of assertion of identity.

To conclude – it would be a grave mistake to assume that these issues are outside the purview of discussions on women’s status post-Beijing. On the contrary, they constitute the bars of the cage that has to be broken if we have to expand and consolidate the gains of the past and face the challenges of the future.

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Monitoring of Beijing PFA

- National governments
- NGO networks (regional, national, sub-regional)
- UN/ donor-sponsored networks (thematic)
- Activist networks (autonomous groups)
- Women's studies networks

**National/regional meetings
from June 2004**



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Post-Beijing gains

- Increase in public space for women and women's issues
- Increased government commitment to women's development
- Women's machineries and National Action Plans in place
- CEDAW signed and endorsed by most countries
- Positive partnerships between NGOs, civil society actors, governments and the UN system.



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Post-Beijing gains

- Improvements in women's material conditions (education, work opportunities)
- Enhanced presence of women in politics
- Enhanced presence/ competence of organisations working for women
- Increase in variety and creativity of development initiatives by and for women
- Women's groups joining hands across borders



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Monitoring is patchy ...

- Government reports tend to whitewash reality
- NGOs/women's group studies discounted on grounds of limited data and methodological flaws
- Donor emphasis on "best practice" over "critical review"
- Limited resources for independent monitoring
- Limited public interest/ involvement in monitoring

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World Social Forum
- women's spaces

- 2-day 'Feminist Dialogue' takes stock of feminist positions
- Debates on "long-held orthodoxies" versus new political frameworks
- Affirmation of continued relevance of feminist struggle
- Clarity on common concerns across continents

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Overarching issues

- Globalisation and hegemonic neo-liberalism
- Militarisation/ imperialism
- Religious fundamentalism
- Resurgent patriarchies

- women in the eye of the storm

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Globalisation

- Cuts in social sector spending
- New jobs created in 'inherently exploitative' sectors (unorganised manufacturing, home-based work, entertainment)
- New 'underclass' of women workers being created in export industries (eg EPZs, "call centres")
- Corporatisation of agriculture and monetisation of common property resources threatens women's survival
- National governments hostage to IFIs in social policy arena



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Militarisation

- Long-standing conflicts within and outside borders – women as victims and combatants
- Reactionary nationalisms and assertions of minority identities
- Revival of 'maternalism'
- Bogey of 'national security' used to justify oppression of minorities (religious, social, sexual)
- "Licence to rape" for military and paramilitary forces
- Women's bodies as battlegrounds
- Re-emergence of family as only 'safe space'



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Fundamentalism

- "War on Terror" creates support for religious revival
- 'Militant religion' as a political force
- Demonisation of Islam
- Glamorisation of religious orthodoxy and deployment of technology for religious indoctrination
- Fundamentalist support to nationalist ideologies and identity politics
- Co-option of anti-globalisation agendas by nationalist/fundamentalist groups



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Resurgent patriarchies

- 'Crisis of masculinity' provide justification for male backlash
- Glamorisation of patriarchy by media
- Domestic violence "goes public" ('honour' killings, community courts)
- "Back to the kitchen" ideologies enforced with violence
- Myth of male marginalisation used to support withdrawal of progressive legislation (eg reservations)
- Re-emergence of family values



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Disturbing trends

- Action against trafficking as a cover for blocking labour migration
- Fear of HIV/AIDS as an excuse for oppression of sexual minorities
- Focus on microcredit as rationale for exclusion of women from economic mainstream
- Cooption of women's rights discourses to provide justification for military/economic aggression
- Depoliticisation of gender discourse obscures connections between macroeconomic policies and women's human rights.



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Disturbing trends

- Donors have ambiguous positions on globalisation
- "NGO-isation" of women's movement
- Shrinking of democratic spaces – less dissent and dialogue
- Governments increasingly insulated from "people's will"
- Decreasing role of UN bodies in development



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Beijing Plus 10

- Challenges for women's movements

- Avoiding the risk of becoming trapped in defending gains of the past
- Staking claims in 'hard' arenas (globalisation, conflict, governance)
- Seeking new forms of engagement with global actors
- Expanding the scope of dialogue (migration, racism, genocide, sexual rights, HIV/AIDS)



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The same questions ...

- Where is the money?
- Where is the justice?
- Where are the women?

