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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

High-level panel discussion marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

Pursuant to its resolution 42/14, the Human Rights Council convened a high-level panel discussion to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, with a particular focus on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome documents of its review conferences, as well as on achievements, best practices and challenges in that regard.



I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to its resolution 42/14, the Human Rights Council convened a high-level panel discussion to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, with a particular focus on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome documents of its review conferences, as well as on achievements, best practices and challenges in that regard.
2. The high-level panel discussion took place on 25 February 2020. The webcast of the discussions is available from <http://webtv.un.org>.

II. Marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

3. The high-level panel discussion was opened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Secretary of State for Development Policy of Denmark, Trine Rask Thygesen, and the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Chen Xu. It was moderated by the President of the Human Rights Council, Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger. The three panellists were the Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and expert on human rights and gender equality Magalys Arocha Dominguez.

A. Opening statements

4. In her opening remarks, the High Commissioner recalled that the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, which had been adopted 25 years before under the rallying cry “women’s rights are human rights”, was a comprehensive expression of States’ commitment to the human rights of women and girls. In a remarkable show of consensus, 189 States pledged to achieve gender equality in practice and in law. That achievement was built on decades of mobilization, advocacy and unwavering commitment by civil society groups, feminist movements and women’s rights activists. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, at which the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had been adopted, women were not asking for any special rights or privileges but the same rights as men.

5. In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action it was made clear that the rights of women and girls were inalienable, integral and indivisible from universal human rights and that cultural relativism could not reasonably be invoked to justify violations of women’s rights. Its adoption was also a significant milestone in recognizing women’s diversity and the need to address multiple forms of discrimination. Moreover, in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, States had stressed the importance of upholding women’s human rights throughout their life cycle and of the link between respect for women’s rights and sustainable development.

6. The High Commissioner pointed out that the Fourth World Conference on Women symbolized a moment of collective and strong commitment to human rights as women’s rights, and that the current political moment was quite different. Human rights, in particular women’s rights, were under attack on many fronts. The recent pushbacks and the resurgence of narratives against gender equality were based on centuries-long discrimination. Women’s rights were not negotiable, nor should they be subject to the changing winds of politics. The High Commissioner emphasized that it was imperative to resist all challenges to the hard-won affirmation of women’s rights as human rights – in their universality and indivisibility, for all women, in their full diversity. Recalling the call to action for human rights delivered by the Secretary-General to the Human Rights Council on 24 February 2020, the High Commissioner reiterated that every country should “support policies and legislation that promote gender equality, repeal discriminatory laws, end violence against women and girls, ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights, and strive for women’s equal representation and participation in all spheres”.

7. In conclusion, she explained that the landmark agreement reached in Beijing was not a coincidence but rather the result of deliberate action by Governments, civil society and other partners to prioritize the realization of women's rights. She urged all stakeholders to rejuvenate the collective unity and vision that had prevailed in Beijing in order to make even more progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

8. In her opening statement, the Secretary of State for Development Policy of Denmark, Ms. Thygesen, emphasized that the high-level panel discussion was a timely opportunity to appreciate the achievements of the previous 25 years and to reflect on the reasons for the ongoing severe backlash globally on issues related to fundamental rights.

9. Ms. Thygesen noted that during the previous 40 years Denmark had been strongly committed to advancing women's and girls' rights and empowerment. In 1980, Denmark had hosted the Second World Conference on Women and, in 2019, it had co-hosted the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development at a summit held in Nairobi from 12 to 14 November 2019. Denmark stood alongside China, Kenya and Mexico, the other hosts of the world conferences on women, in demonstrating that there was cross-regional consensus on the need to realize the rights of all women and girls.

10. Emphasizing the achievements that had been made since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Ms. Thygesen stated that in two thirds of countries there were as many girls as boys in primary school. Many women had entered the labour market and maternal mortality had declined by almost 40 per cent. Despite that progress, however, there was work yet to be done in order to realize the promises made in Beijing. For example, one in three women still experienced violence in their lifetime, 830 women and girls still died every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth and, on average, men earned 63 per cent more than women and that gap continued to increase.

11. The commitments made in Beijing remained more than ever relevant and 2020 was a pivotal moment to recommit. Ms. Thygesen underscored the importance of the Generation Equality Forum, a civil society-centred global gathering for gender equality convened by UN-Women and co-hosted by the Governments of France and Mexico. In that context, she welcomed the six action coalitions (designed to accelerate fulfilment of the Beijing promises) on gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights, feminist action for climate justice, technology and innovation for gender equality and feminist movements and leadership.¹ Those action coalitions could promote future joint efforts through innovative partnerships involving Governments, civil society, the private sector and youth. Denmark had expressed interest in taking a leading role in the action coalition on bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The final push for gender equality should be a joint effort, as no one country could do it alone.

12. In his opening statement, the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Mr. Chen, recalled that the Fourth World Conference on Women had been held in Beijing 25 years earlier and that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had since become the leading framework guiding the international cause for women's rights.

13. Mr. Chen noted that much progress had been made in realizing women's rights since then, including in terms of access to education, freedom to marry and inclusion in all parts of the workforce. As a result, the status of women had reached new levels in China. In terms of recent events, China had mobilized all resources nationwide to combat the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), with female doctors and nurses playing a key role. Despite those achievements, there remained inequalities between men and women in opportunities and the distribution of resources. He pointed out that worldwide women aged 25–34 years were 25 per cent more likely to be living in extreme poverty than men. Many women and girls suffered deeply from imbalanced development, war, climate change and other challenges, including as victims of gender-based violence and human trafficking.

¹ See <https://forum.generationequality.org/about>.

14. Mr. Chen underscored the importance of ensuring that women enjoyed an equal share of the benefits arising from development; improving the protection of women's rights in a systemic manner, including their rights to education and health; and exposing and addressing the gender gap in social protection. He also noted the importance of strengthening international cooperation on women's rights.

15. In his concluding remarks, Mr. Chen called upon States to continue to support developing countries in achieving those goals and reiterated that China was willing to cooperate with the international community in efforts to further promote women's cause around the world.

B. Overview of presentations

16. The President of the Human Rights Council introduced the three panellists: the Executive Director of UN-Women, the Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and expert on human rights and gender equality Maglys Arocha Dominguez.

17. The Executive Director of UN-Women noted that the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had been a milestone for efforts to achieve gender equality. The world was on a positive path towards achieving gender equality, but progress had been slow and unequal and there had been significant pushback. In particular, significant progress had been made worldwide in terms of access by women and girls to health and education. However, there had been unacceptably slow progress on the economic front, with the global gender gap in labour force participation stagnating. Moreover, of those employed, 58 per cent of women worked in the informal sector, which meant that women remained much closer to poverty than prosperity. Violence against women and girls remained a silent and endemic crisis. On a positive note, there were a number of critical cross-cutting measures that could be taken to overcome stagnation and catalyse efforts to accelerate progress towards gender equality. Those included adequate financing through the mobilization of financial resources, removing all discriminatory laws and closing the gap between equality in law and in practice. UN-Women was going to convene the Generation Equality Forum, together with the Governments of France and Mexico, in order to deliver concrete, game-changing results for women and girls and to fulfil the promises made in Beijing.

18. The Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women began by stressing that the ground-breaking Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had been a strong guiding framework throughout her journey as an advocate for gender equality and peace. She stressed that the Committee had been crucial for making States more accountable, thereby accelerating the implementation of the commitments made in Beijing. Moreover, the legally binding nature of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women made it the strongest mechanism available for promoting and protecting women's human rights. The Vice-Chair underscored the fact that the Committee, through its constructive dialogues and recommendations, guided States in measuring their progress and identifying areas where efforts needed to be intensified. The Committee was also supporting States to strengthen their accountability for achieving a world free from violence, stigma and stereotype, a world where there were no child marriages, a world where there was equal pay for equal work and a world that established lasting peace and security for all. The Vice-Chair lamented the fact that the women, peace and security agenda had not been included in the six action coalitions, and thus urged the organizers of the Generation Equality Forum to consider including that important agenda. The Vice-Chair noted the global backlash against the gains made for women's rights and deplored the continued reality of discrimination against women – for example, hundreds of thousands of women died each year from complications in pregnancy and less than a quarter of members of parliament were women. Effective institutions needed to be created and adequate resources needed to be allocated for women to realize their rights. The year 2020 should be the moment for accelerating action on commitments as the world could not afford a regression.

19. Ms. Arocha Dominguez commemorated all the women human rights defenders who had come before and who had contributed to the world conferences on women held in Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi, which had set the groundwork for the Beijing

conference, held in 1995. She noted that women from Latin America and the Caribbean had developed strategic unity when they went to the Fourth World Conference on Women, as a result of their cooperation on the Mar del Plata action plan, a crucial milestone in the fight. Unfortunately, the broad vision of the Beijing conference had narrowed over time, with some aspects getting a great deal of attention while others were ignored or attracted limited visibility and resources. In particular, the issue of peace had become distorted and reduced to the women, peace and security agenda of the Security Council. The understanding of conflict and insecurity that had been articulated in Beijing, including in respect of militarization, occupation, coercive measures and economic sanctions, had been forgotten, with problematic repercussions. Ms. Arocha Dominguez stressed that inequality had grown, leading to social consequences such as the protests taking place on the streets of Latin America. Women had been at the forefront of those protests and were demanding change. She noted that poverty had led to women working in slavery-like conditions in some parts of the world. Child pregnancies were still an issue, and the chauvinist and harmful stereotypes that underpinned sexual violence against women remained unaddressed across the world. Ms. Arocha Dominguez urged States to take a position against the increasing number of conservative religious, cultural and political forces whose rhetoric, harassment and threats delegitimized the feminist movement, for example by pushing for the prohibition of gender studies. Women's equality could not be achieved in isolation but, rather, required action within the right social frameworks. In conclusion, as long as there were chauvinist, racist and male-dominated societies and as long as the dominant economic and social model was centred on profit, there would be no gender equality.

C. Statements by representatives of States and observers

20. During the ensuing discussion, speakers from the floor welcomed the opportunity to mark the progress made in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 25 years since its adoption, and to address the remaining challenges to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. It was highlighted that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action continued to represent the most comprehensive commitment to gender equality, women's and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights and their empowerment. The speakers especially appreciated the important normative work done by the Human Rights Council to support the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Some speakers emphasized the importance and relevance of the legally binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which offered a human rights-based foundation for furthering the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as related commitments, such as those contained in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Sustainable Development Goals and the women, peace and security agenda.

21. The speakers noted that the global efforts made to advance gender equality since 1995 had resulted in significant progress in ensuring women's rights in areas such as education, health, political representation, decision-making and economic empowerment. Speakers noted that women's empowerment and equality were national priorities. In particular, speakers reported on national laws and policies adopted or amended to combat violence against women and girls in all its forms and manifestations. Some speakers pointed to the efforts made by Governments to promote the full participation of women in positions of power and key decision-making institutions. As for the representation of women in decision-making bodies, speakers cited measures and laws to strengthen their presence in high-ranking positions, noting that real empowerment started at the very top. Women should be able to occupy leadership positions without any discrimination. Measures should be taken in the areas of socioeconomics and politics to fast-track programmes for women's empowerment and gender equality. For example, some speakers explained that national strategic plans targeting the prevention of gender-based violence and femicide had been established.

22. The speakers recognized that, despite those achievements, implementation had been slow and uneven and significant challenges on the path towards gender equality remained, in each and every area of action, from quality education and health to the economy and decision-making. Some stressed the collective responsibility to protect the agreed normative framework and to ensure that achievements were used to strengthen and extend

the foundations of the agenda set out in the Beijing Declaration and at the review conferences.

23. The speakers pointed to numerous remaining challenges. For instance, several speakers recognized the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that women and girls experienced on a daily basis, in particular in humanitarian settings. Specific barriers to the economic empowerment of women were cited, such as the need for Governments to work with multiple stakeholders, including the business sector, and the need for more dedicated efforts to support shared parental responsibilities. Some speakers explained that women did not have equal access to the resources and opportunities they needed to be more productive, which in turn negatively affected agriculture, forestry and fisheries in many developing countries and contributed to rural poverty and malnutrition.

24. Another challenge that was raised during the discussion was the failure to secure sexual and reproductive health care and rights, as well as to protect bodily autonomy, which contributed to preventable deaths and injuries for women and girls worldwide. Some speakers reaffirmed the importance of sexual and reproductive health care and rights and their indivisibility from the realization of women's rights and the achievement of gender equality. The need for universal access to quality and affordable sexual and reproductive health-care services, including comprehensive sexuality education, was also raised. Some speakers noted that it was necessary to dismantle patriarchal structures and values that frequently tended to invoke religion, culture and tradition in order to curb women's and girls' rights, in particular their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

25. The importance of responding to the current backlash against gender equality was also underscored. Speakers urged States to fight against such attacks on women's rights, including efforts to diminish funding for women's rights organizations. In light of those regressive trends, some speakers stressed the need to continue to engage, including by means of adequate and effective financing, with all relevant actors, including women's rights organizations, feminist groups, women human rights defenders and young people, to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

26. Several speakers highlighted that women played a key role in promoting the peace and security agenda and, in particular, that the struggle for women's rights was linked to the struggle for peace. One speaker emphasized that the women, peace and security agenda should be meaningfully integrated into all aspects of the Generation Equality Forum and the action coalitions. It was noted that issues of peace and security were cross-cutting and that they had an impact on and were affected by a myriad of factors, including climate change, economic justice, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to technology. Accordingly, the speakers called upon the Human Rights Council to include a more gender-sensitive analysis of conflict in its resolutions, reports and other tools.

27. It was mentioned that predictive analytics and other forms of artificial intelligence were highly likely to reproduce and deepen traditional gender and racial biases reflected in the existing data.

28. Given the persistent justice gap between men and women, the rule of law should be promoted as an enabler of gender equality. Equal access to justice could make a real difference in the lives of women and girls, especially those living in rural areas and with disabilities. Speakers thus asked how investments in access to justice for women and girls could be mobilized.

29. The speakers highlighted that, in order to accelerate progress in terms of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, to achieve the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and to ensure that no one was left behind, international commitment and national-level action were important. Some speakers called upon the United Nations to continue to support local, national, regional and international efforts for the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its review at the international, regional, national and local levels. Speakers also noted that full implementation of the Beijing agenda would require transformational laws, systemic change, strong financial contributions and multilateral cooperation.

D. Responses of the panellists and concluding remarks

30. In her response, the Executive Director of UN-Women highlighted a number of areas of work on which UN-Women had focused, including the action coalitions. She underscored the cross-cutting efforts that had been made to overcome stagnation and to catalyse action to make progress towards gender equality, which included raising funds for equality, removing all discriminatory laws, closing the gap between equality in law and in practice, strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equality and the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda. She looked forward to the decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (2020–2030). Recalling the role of UN-Women in the Generation Equality Forum, to be co-hosted by the Governments of France and Mexico, she called upon States, the private sector and civil society to be parties to the project.

31. The Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reiterated that, while progress on women's rights had been made, problems persisted, the most prominent of which was violence against women. In addressing that problem, it was imperative to address stereotypes and stigma and to engage men, boys and faith-based leaders in a constructive dialogue. In particular, she noted the importance of reporting to the Committee, which had helped States to become more gender sensitive, for example by legislating against harmful practices and bringing stakeholders together. She urged States, human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations to provide as much information as possible to the Committee, to help it carry out its work. She highlighted that the Committee had made it mandatory for States to report on progress made in implementing the recommendations on women's rights, including in the area of women, peace and security. In conclusion, the Vice-Chair appealed to States to see the significance of strengthening the treaty body mechanisms and providing information to make sure that the Beijing commitments became a reality and that no one was left behind.

32. Ms. Arocha Dominguez noted that some gaps remained and that it would be helpful to develop indicators to better capture the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls, including indigenous women, adolescent girls, women living in poverty and women working in a specific sector, for example as seasonal workers. She thanked the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Center for Reproductive Rights for having raised important issues and having submitted relevant evidence to the Committee. In conclusion, she stressed the importance of utilizing the Committee to further gender equality and women's rights, and noted that there was no distinction between women's rights and human rights, as women's rights were human rights.