

Did Beijing 1995 Make any Real Difference for Women?

What else do we need to do?

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“More of the same will not do.” That’s the important takeaway from the new report [“Progress of the World’s Women 2015”](#) from UN Women.

Twenty years ago, the Beijing Summit of the UN was seen as a pathbreaking attempt to bring about major improvements in the conditions of women across the world. But did it really make much difference? What has actually changed in terms of gender disparities? And what can we do to make sure that this time around – as the international community contemplates new global goals for sustainable development – there will be genuine and transformative progress for women?

The Report answers these questions by framing them in the language of human rights, and uses international human rights standards such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)—to assess laws and policies for their actual effect on women and girls on the ground. The answers are somewhat dispiriting: positive movements are slow, uneven and in some regions even going in the opposite direction.

Education is the area where the most improvements have been made, though some gender gaps remain. But in “economic activity” there is relatively little progress and in some cases even deterioration. Gender gaps in recognized and paid work participation remain huge – with women’s rates being around 26 per cent lower than men’s rates globally, and in some countries as much as 80 per cent lower. Women who do engage in paid work are concentrated in low-paid employment and on average get paid 24 per cent less than male workers. In developing countries three quarters of women workers are in informal work, with no legal or social protection.

Even when they manage to get formal employment, women face particular problems, even in apparently more privileged situations. For example, in the European Union, 75 per cent of women in management and higher professional positions and 61 per cent of women in service sector occupations have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace in their lifetime.

Discrimination in paid work is compounded by the burden of unpaid work, which falls disproportionately on women. On average, women across the world do nearly two and a half times more unpaid care and domestic work than men. Counting both paid and unpaid work, women work longer hours than men in almost all countries.

This should be a paradox by now. After all, by now women and girls have almost equal opportunities in education, yet globally only half of working age women are in the labourforce. More and more women work in service activities in which they are equally if not more productive than males workers, yet women still earn much less than men. This is an era of unprecedented global wealth, yet millions of women are still not able to access even basic levels of health care, water and sanitation. What prevents the achievement of substantive equality, rather than just nominal or de jure equality?

It is true that gender discrimination compounds other forms of disadvantage—on the basis of socio-economic status, geographic location, race, caste and ethnicity, sexuality or disability—to limit women’s and girls’ opportunities and life chances. The report goes beyond this to make a stronger point: some patterns of economic growth are premised on

maintaining gender inequalities: such as in work and earnings, and in unequal patterns of unpaid work that consign women to domestic drudgery. So it is not just that economic progress has not managed to generate more social progress and gender justice: rather, some economic growth actually depends on such discrimination, by ensuring cheaper workers and subsidizing the profits of employers across both formal and informal sectors.

If so, it should come as no surprise that these patterns have barely changed in the past twenty years: there are too many vested interests, both private and public, that effectively work against any improvement.

In such a case, simply announcing some quantitative targets (say, for educational enrolment or work participation rates or maternal mortality) will just not work. We have to go beyond simply absorbing more girls into underfunded educational systems, to ensure that schools provide quality education and a safe learning environment, and contribute to promoting equality through progressive curricula and well-trained teachers. Drawing more women into increasingly precarious and unrewarding forms of employment need not empower women: instead, the point is to transform labour markets to provide better conditions for both women and men. Paid work can be a foundation for substantive equality for women, but only when it is compatible with women's and men's shared responsibility for unpaid care work; when it gives women enough time for leisure and learning; when it provides earnings that are sufficient to maintain an adequate standard of living; and when women are treated with respect and dignity at work.

So lasting improvement in the conditions of women requires coordinated public action across three dimensions: redressing women's socio-economic disadvantage; addressing stereotyping, stigma and violence; and strengthening women's agency, voice and participation. And this obviously has to happen at every level of society, from households to labour markets and from communities to local, national and global governance institutions.

How can this be done? The Report suggests action oriented to the following goals: creating more and better jobs for women; reducing occupational segregation and gender pay gaps; strengthening women's income security throughout the life cycle; recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work; investing in gender-responsive social services; supporting women's organizations to claim rights and shape policy agendas at all levels; and of course creating an enabling global environment for all of this.

This may sound like a tall order, but the Report also provides positive examples of how at least some of these goals can be striven for and achieved. So in Brazil there was [significant improvement](#) of women's employment between 2001 and 2009, with more jobs for women, higher wages, reduced gender pay gaps and better social protection. These were the result of proactive government policies like raising minimum wages, providing more social security, enabling collective bargaining etc., which operated positively even in an international context of greater labour flexibility and vulnerability.

Even a post-conflict country like [Rwanda](#) has managed to reduce the number of maternal deaths faster than most other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, from 1,400 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 310 in 2013. This required a combination of measures, including more public spending on health centres and personnel, decentralized management to allow for monitoring and rewarding better performance and using new technologies to improve information access for both recipients and service providers.

So in framing new goals for women twenty years after the Beijing Conference, neither vague promises nor a few quantified targets will be good enough. Substantive equality for women also requires macroeconomic and social policies designed for inclusive growth and supportive measures that rely on proactive and accountable public spending. This

comprehensive and nuanced Report provides many workable ideas – now we have to mobilize to put these into action.