What Went Wrong with the Women’s Revolution?
Factors Impeding Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

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At the opening session of the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in September 1995, Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the Conference, announced “the revolution has begun; there is no turning back.” All of us who were involved with the negotiations of the Conference final document, the Beijing Platform for Action, would have agreed. We left the Conference convinced – in my masculine analogy – that based on the agreements reached by governments, the war had been won and all that was left was mopping-up actions.

The basis for this belief was that the Platform contained commitments, from governments, international organizations and civil society – all of whose responsibilities were set out in detail – that would set in motion social and economic processes that could not be reversed and would inevitably lead to equality between women and men.

Ten years later, it seems that we were wrong. The Women’s Revolution seems to have stalled. The five-year review in 2000, at a special session of the General Assembly, barely was able to reiterate the agreements made. The ten-year review, at a regular session of the Commission on the Status of Women, was barely able to adopt an anodyne one-page declaration that said that the Platform was still valid. How could we be so off the mark in 1995? What went wrong with the Women’s Revolution?

What was supposed to happen: the inevitable processes of change?

The Platform for Action was very specific about what was supposed to happen. It was structured around 12 “critical areas of concern”. While they were a mixed bag, they contained what could be called key enabling factors. They said that if women could gain equal access to education, fair chances to participate in the economy, and could exercise their political rights, they could ensure that other aspects of the Platform, like eradication of poverty, human rights and health, could be achieved.

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The term “platform” was chosen for the final document in preference to the usual “program of action” or “plan of action” to emphasize the political nature of the process. A platform, in politics, is the values, strategies and programs on which a candidate or party runs for office.

In terms of the critical area of concern called “women in power and decision-making”, the strategic objective was to “Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.” Since “taking measures” is an activity rather than an objective, what was meant was that, by 2000, women should have equal access and full participation.

If that were to happen, women would be able to ensure that public laws, policies, programs and resources would be directed to ensure equality of opportunity. Girls and boys would have equal access to all levels of education, to health services, to employment (based on family-friendly policies), to the mass media. Gender-based poverty (and poverty generally) would decrease; armed conflicts become less likely; violence against women eliminated. Women would enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with men.

There was clear evidence that this could happen, because in a few countries that is what had already happened. And, as the Division for the Advancement of Women was prone to note in its reports, in every country where both men and women vote, there are more women voters than men, and if they ever voted on the basis of gender, they would hold every elective office on the planet.

**What stopped the processes?**

So, what stopped these inevitable processes? The reviews and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action that were done in 2000 and 2005 do not really tell us. Unlike the reviews prepared in 1990 and 1995, these were cautious documents that repeated national reports that progress was being made and that things were good in this the best of all possible worlds, as Dr. Pangloss in *Candide* might have said. Even the NGO community focused only on the matter of legal rights in their “shadow” reviews and appraisal. To answer the question, we have to look harder and closer at political and economic realities, and on the idea brokers that explain them.

**Lack of progress in political decision-making**

While there have been, on average, over 3 national elections in countries where elections take place, there has been little progress in improving the representation of women in parliaments, one of the few statistics that is even maintained (by the Interparliamentary
The figures show some progress. The average percentage of women in lower or single houses of parliament (upper houses invariably involved a lower percentage of women) in 1995 was 8 percent. In 2004, it had leaped to 12.4 percent. Even the four percent increase was largely explained by a few countries (like Spain, Burundi and Rwanda) that had over 20 percent increases, and by a few countries, like Pakistan and Timor L’este that had put in a quota for women in their parliaments. In the United States, which has no quotas, the representation of women in the lower house of parliament increased from 11 to 14 percent (the same percentage as in the Senate).

There is a consensus that for women to function as an effective group, they need to reach a critical mass. The Platform notes that the target for this, for 1995, was 30 percent. Only sixteen countries (ten in Europe, as well as in Rwanda, Burundi, South Africa and Mozambique in Africa, Costa Rica and Argentina in Latin America) were at the 30 percent threshold in 2004 and most are far away from it.

In the research leading up to the Beijing Conference, the Division for the Advancement of Women recognized that representation in parliaments was not the only, or even the best, indicator of women’s participation in power and decision-making. Many parliaments were not really decision-makers and, in any case, governments were not usually run by their parliaments. Moreover, the Division concluded that

… it was easier to achieve a critical mass in the civil service than in the electorate, since positive action measures could be imposed as a matter of public policy without necessarily creating conflicts within the political structure. In many systems it was merely a matter of the chief executive making an effort to name women to sub-ministerial decision-making system. In others, affirmative action measures could be set up within the workings of the career civil service.

Absent any statistics on the extent to which women were represented in governmental senior management-level positions, the Division proceeded to develop the statistics. It did so by buying copy of the World-Wide Government Directory of 1987/88 coding the individuals whose names appeared at the highest four levels (minister, deputy minister,

1 United Nations Statistical Division, Statistics and indicators on women and men, Table 6 - Women in parliament.
3 Rwanda, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Cuba, Norway, Spain, Costa Rica, Belgium, Argentina, Austria, South Africa, Germany, Mozambique and Iceland.
permanent secretary and head of department, or equivalents) by sex as well as by type of ministry. It did this again for the 1995 Review and Appraisal and observed an increase in the proportion of women (which was still, for most governments, far below the critical mass).

It would be nice to report that progress has been made on this aspect of women in power and decision-making, but unfortunately, the United Nations ceased to collect this information after 1995 and there is no way to measure progress or its lack.

The conclusion is that women have not advanced sufficiently in participation in power and decision-making to provide the enabling force that was envisaged at Beijing.

**Fundamentalism**

One reason for the lack of progress in politics is probably the rise of fundamentalist movements all over the world. These are formally based on revival of conservative religious norms. In a seminar organized by the United Nations University’s World Institute for Development Economics Research in 1990, this was analyzed as a political phenomenon under the heading “identity politics”.$^5$ The participants, looking at all major religions, concluded that one factor behind this type of fundamentalism was a perception by men that their positions, and therefore their identity were being threatened by women’s advancement. They used religion, over which in most societies, they have control, as a means to justify the denial to women of the exercise of their equal rights (in the name of the family, or religion, or whatever). The debates about women’s equal rights in family law in the new Iraqi constitution are only one reflection of this. So are the renewed efforts to constrain women’s reproductive rights in the United States.

While the effects of fundamentalist movements on advancement of women are clearly known (and can be easily demonstrated), this has not been addressed strongly by either governments or the women’s movement. Until it is, religion will be used to stop progress, even when religious doctrine really promotes equality.

**United States positions**

The positions taken in the United Nations on issues related to implementation of the Beijing Platform, as well as other issues, have served as obstacles to achievement of the objectives that were agreed. As a major world power, the United States has an inordinate effect on international agreements.

The United States had never taken a leading role in advancement of women at the international level, from the beginning of the United Nations when Mrs. Roosevelt opposed the creation of a separate Commission on the Status of Women to the present, where the United States is the only country not to be party to the United Nations

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$^5$ This was published as *Identity politics and women: cultural reassertions and feminisms in international perspective*, Valentine Moghadam (ed), New York: Westview Press, 1994.
Convention on the Rights of the Child\textsuperscript{6} and one of the few not to be a party to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. While it was supportive of the Beijing Conference, the United States emphasized ensuring that positions were not agreed at Beijing that went beyond agreements in other forums, and in that sense the Platform stayed within the boundaries of other agreements.

Since 2001 the United States appears to have actively sought to undermine the Platform. Its actions at the 2005 session of the Commission on the Status of Women showed hostility, drawn from the conservative tendencies that have emerged in the current government, to those elements of the Platform that affect reproductive rights, although the Platform texts merely restate agreements in that area. Coupled with a general hostility to affirmative action and its curious approach to human rights (where economic, social and cultural rights are not seen as rights – only aspirations), the United States has – deliberately or not -- effectively been able to slow progress, if not stop it altogether at the international level.

**Mainstreaming or “women's rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights” but so what?**

One of the innovations at the Beijing Conference (and reflected throughout the Platform) was the idea of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming meant looking at everything with a gender lens. It meant, for example, looking at the differential impact of policies on women and men, or at gender differences when identifying problems. In this sense, it was a very sensible concept. It said, don’t treat women as separate, instead build an analytic and policy culture that notes differences between women and men that are reflective of their societally-determined roles and deals with them.

When the concept was first advanced, sometime after the Nairobi Conference, a danger was expressed: make sure that mainstreaming gender doesn’t mean disappearing in the stream. There is some evidence that this is exactly what happened.

Gender mainstreaming requires that policy analysts and decision-makers consciously seek to identify gender differences so that policies can take these into account. On the whole, evidence shows that women are more likely to do this than men (who have very little to lose by not doing gender analysis). But even women feel uncomfortable identifying gender differences, since this would seem to call their own status into question.

A good example of this was the famous statement, made at Beijing, by Hillary Clinton, then First Lady (a nice sexist term for the spouse of a head of state) that “women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights.” The tautology aside, this was never an issue. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (through its Article 3) specifies that women and men have the same rights. The real issue was whether men and

\textsuperscript{6} Technically Somalia is also not a party, but this is because Somalia has not had a recognized government since the Convention was adopted and therefore couldn’t ratify it if it wanted to.
women enjoyed these rights on the same basis and it was the clear evidence that women enjoyed them less than men. This in turn led to, among other things, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

There has been an increasing assertion that the sameness of rights means that focusing on women’s enjoyment of them somehow demeans women (at least women in power). Since women clearly have equal rights to vote and stand for public office, the fact that they aren’t elected must be their fault. Rights have been mainstreamed, but their equal enjoyment has disappeared in the stream.

**The return of “Women as Victim”**

In the run-up to the Beijing Conference one innovation was to avoid using the argument of “women as victim”. Much of the prior advocacy was based on showing how women were victimized by society and that, on the basis of pity, they should be helped. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, without consciously trying to do so, embodied this approach. When I read the Strategies, which described what should be done for women, I concluded:

> The most difficult aspect of the Strategies was the tone. Written in passive voice, it implied that various actors should take measures to overcome obstacles. As an inter-governmental document, most of the measures should, in principle, be taken by Governments. However, since most governments were run by men, in effect the Strategies asked men to do the right thing by their women, a kind of Victorian approach that essentially left no-one really responsible for implementing the Strategies and made monitoring extremely difficult, as was soon learned.

The real problem with the “woman as victim” approach is that it is based on weakness. If women cannot solve the problems of their victimhood, then men must. This in itself encourages inequality. It says, “women and children into the lifeboat first” but the corollary is “men will be steering the ship.” Put another way, victims are universally seen as being powerless. Too often, those dealing with victims seek to provide blame, with the victim gaining a certain status as a passive center of attention. Until women – or any victimized group – choose to abandon the “blame game” and act out of empowerment, they will never change their position.

Recognizing this and emphasizing the positive role of women, as solutions rather than problems, the Platform was intended to be an empowering document.

Since Beijing, we have seen a steady reversion to the “woman as victim” again. Women are presented, by researchers and advocacy groups, as victims of armed conflict, globalization, violence in the family, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS and fundamentalism. If the argument ends there, the only solution is for men to do the right thing and deal with those things that are victimizing their womenfolk. That would hardly be a very effective strategy for achieving equality.

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And yet, sinking into the slough of victimology despond is so easy.

**Women’s Studies have failed to engage**

The new generation of women who will be leaders are in the universities now. Many will be influenced by academic women’s studies. In the run-up to Beijing, many important ideas came from the academics who ran those programs, although clearly not as many as came from grassroots organizers. If Women’s Studies programs had engaged with the Platform, there would be active curricula, research and training in those areas, like politics, where empowerment was critical.

Instead, women’s studies have been largely absent from the advocacy front. There is a tendency in academic research to focus more on problems than on the analysis of solutions. When the academic world is uncritical, how can governments be expected to be critical?

**The UN Secretariat may have lost its mojo**

Whatever one thinks about the United Nations, a main factor in the success of the Beijing Conference was the United Nations Secretariat. Its Division for the Advancement of Women prepared policy studies, ran expert groups (some 28), and supported the negotiations of the Platform. UNIFEM helped generate a strong non-governmental presence in the developing countries.

In the 10 years since Beijing, the Secretariat seems to be losing its mojo and this has contributed to the slowing of progress. It became a victim of all of the factors noted, including fundamentalism, mainstreaming and seeing women as victim. While it has continued to hold expert group meetings, these were infrequently on new subjects, did not actively seek new approaches to issues and did not engage civil society or the academic community in defining them. There appear to be almost a sense of fear of generating controversy. Instead, the Secretariat has emphasized mainstreaming, with the attendant risk of disappearing in the stream.

The most prominent current activity is a global study of violence against women. While the issue continues to be very important, the fact that it is the center of Secretariat attention demonstrates the problem faced by the Secretariat. The issue has been studied by the Secretariat since the mid-1980’s and the causes, policy issues and solutions are fairly well known. The issue itself can easily be framed in the “woman as victim” mode, and the solutions tend to be of the “governments should do something about it” type. One reason that the issue has not been successfully dealt with is that the governments are still predominately men and they have little incentive to do anything about the problem. Clearly, the Secretariats are reverting to the tried and true rather than exploring how to move the process further.

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Without a strong secretariat undertaking the role of opinion leader, the intergovernmental machinery of the United Nations will increasingly be tentative and weak in implementing Beijing.\footnote{I have described that role of the Secretariat in “UN Secretariat: The Gatekeepers of Ideas” in Anita Anand (ed.), Beijing! UN Fourth World Conference on Women, New Delhi: Women’s Feature Service, 1998.}

**What do we need to do to re-start the revolution?**

This analysis presents a fairly dark picture of a revolution that has effectively stopped while the forces of counterrevolution seem to be flourishing. Still, the cause is not lost. One area where progress has been achieved is in equality in third level education, where in most countries over half of the students are women. Another is that the grass roots women’s organizations remain strong, even if they are not “thinking globally”. The revolution can be re-started, but it will take some fairly dramatic efforts.

**A serious review and appraisal**

The truth is, the real situation of women in the world is not known anymore. In the 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s a main means of monitoring was through the periodic reviews and appraisal undertaken by the United Nations. The 2005 review and appraisal was done a very old-fashioned way: a questionnaire was sent to governments and their replies, mostly describing laws changed or programs implemented rather than changes in the situation of women relative to men.

A real review and appraisal, based on empirical fact, that is honest and draws strong conclusions is needed. It should summarize academic research, human rights reporting and should be based on comparable statistics. From this review, what really needs to be done will be seen.

**Fill the data gaps**

Whether recognized or not, the Beijing Conference drew much of its strength from the statistics that could finally demonstrate in convincing, empirical terms, what gender differences meant. The three issues of *The World’s Women* (the United Nations best-selling statistical publication ever) published in 1991, 1995 and 2000 set a standard of competence and credibility, although the first was the most risk-taking in its advocacy. Gender statistics have again begun to receive lower priority both at national and international levels and when that happens, gender differences are not observed. A new edition of *The World’s Women* is not being planned.

Moreover, some of the statistical series that were not built into the work of national statistical offices but were being generated at the international level, like those on women in government, have been abandoned.
It is time to resuscitate gender statistics and issue them regularly, with analysis as well as figures.

**Stop arguing from weakness**

It is also time to abandon, forever, “women as victims” as a mode of argumentation. The one empirical conclusion from most gender studies is that women are no less strong than men and are no more naturally prone to becoming victims than men. The approach that says empowering women is empowering society, with attendant mobilization of evidence, has to become the norm again. This applies equally to advocacy and to research, where orientation is a matter of choice.

**Engage the next generation**

The women who were leaders at Beijing are, one after another, retiring from the scene. There is a new generation of leaders that is coming to power. Most of these did not experience Beijing, which for them is a distant event. They will have to take over the revolution, but for that to happen, they will have to become engaged.

Engaging a generation for whom many of the causes that brought women into politics (like voting, reproductive rights and violence against women) are not as pressing will not be easy. Their concerns and the issues that trend analysis will grow during their watch have to be identified and brought forward.

**The Next-Generation World Conference**

How can these distinct actions, a true review and appraisal, filling the data gaps, changing the advocacy orientation and engaging the next generation be organized? Here the philosophy behind the Beijing Conference itself may be instructive.

When the Fourth World Conference on Women was being planned, there was no certainty that it would be adequately funded or that it would be well-attended. Conferences had fallen from fashion by the end of the 1980’s and, after all, only 8,000 people had attended the Nairobi Conference. The Division for the Advancement of Women took the position that this was irrelevant. The Beijing Conference was an excuse for its preparations. Put another way, it was a case of the means justifying the end. The Beijing Conference would serve as a focus for mobilization, for research, for dialogue, for lobbying and for conspiring. Whether the Conference itself succeeded in adopting a document was largely irrelevant, if the preparations took place.

The evidence shows that this approach worked. And it can work again. If a Conference is scheduled for 2010, it can become a focus for reviews and appraisal, research, dialogue, lobbying, self-examination and conspiracy. The fact that it is coming when one of the decennial censuses is about to start means that it can influence future data collection. It can give the Secretariat and other parts of the United Nations system a focus to their work. More importantly it can engage the interest of the next generation of women: it will be their conference. It can also be seen in the larger context of women’s role in ensuring the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. And it can
be seen in the context of demonstrating women’s political clout in a way that even Beijing did not. If it can focus on issues that mobilize women into politics it can be a mobilizing force itself.

The Next Generation World Conference on Women can be the spark that restarts the revolution.