

Defining An African Women's Agenda Beyond Beijing

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Introduction

The main chorus throughout the Fourth World Conference on Women held last September in Beijing China was "action, action, action!" For the thousands and thousands of women and men who gathered in Beijing, the Fourth World Conference provided the last opportunity, this century, for the world to review the situation of women, and to chart out a path to change the persistent political, economic and social inequality between men and women that has hampered women's overall development.

For the international media, Beijing provided the opportunity to focus on China's human rights; the mud, rain and "inadequate" accommodation in Huairou — where the Non-Governmental Forum was held; and the showdown between the women's movement and fundamentalists over key issues, such as reproductive health, sexual rights and the universality of women's rights, to be included in the final document.

Beijing, however, was much more. At the Non-governmental Forum, women of all ages, races and classes gathered under tents, braving the natural elements, to discuss issues as diverse as the alleviation of poverty to natural healing. The official directory of the NGO Forum was more than 100-pages of workshops and seminars. Women wove cloth, sang songs, formed human protest chains against Chinese security and debated the issues around the conference's theme of equality, development and peace. Even the Main Governmental Forum, which was more formal and procedural than the NGO Forum, became a showcase of women's ability to challenge the given structures of the world. Women gathered in Beijing, to challenge once and for all, the patriarchal political, social and economic global hegemony which has permeated all parts of the world.

Women are no longer just demanding their rightful place at the national table of policy making, they are also beginning to think regionally and globally. As Charlotte Bunch, director of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, said in her address to the plenary for the NGO Forum: "Women's voices must be part of the global agenda if we are to see change in the 21st century. Women must redefine the fundamental questions of democracy, development, peace and the environment."

The trek towards Beijing began in the 1970s. The first intergovernmental Conference on Women was held in Mexico in 1975, which was also designated as International Women's Year (IWY). The themes of the Mexico Conference were Equality, Development and Peace. The outcome of this first international women's conference was the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace, and a World Plan of Action for the implementation of the objectives of the International Women's Year.

The United Nations also declared 1976 - 1985 as a Decade for Women. During this time frame, the World Plan of Action from Mexico was to be implemented at national, regional and international levels. The Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980 to assess the progress made since Mexico and to formulate a plan of action for the second half of the Decade for Women. In Copenhagen, three sub-themes were added to the earlier themes of Equality, Development and Peace. These were Education, Employment and Health.

Africa hosted the Third World Conference on Women, which marked the end of the decade. A vibrant, but still fledgling women's movement aided in the formation by governments of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women up to the year 2000. Even leading up to Beijing, the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies were described as "radical" in pointing the way towards equal development for women. But the economic changes since 1985, especially in Africa where countries latched on to Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAP) to shore up their ailing economies, led to governments pushing the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies to the back of the shelves to gather dust.

But as the end of the decade came nearer, a myriad of United Nations world conferences began to address the concerns of women. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Brazil, not only addressed the growing concern of how the world could sustain its fast depleting resources, but also focused on women, the environment and development. Under the leadership of a renowned African woman academic and researcher, Dr. Filomina Steady from Sierra Leone, who was the special advisor on women to UNCED Secretary General Maurice Strong, women worldwide ensured that a large section of Agenda 21, the global environmental blueprint, spoke to the concerns of women and their role and environmental concerns.

The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen also devoted large sections of their final global treaties to women's equality and development. These conferences laid the crucial groundwork for Beijing through the gathering of further data and extensive research on women in relation to specific areas. For the growing women's movement, these gatherings provided the opportunity for networking at the global level and the fine-tuning of lobbying and advocacy skills. By the time Beijing rolled around, women from Asia, Latin America, North America, Europe and to some extent Africa, were no longer shooting from the hip, but were armed with facts and figures in the fight for an international agenda that speaks to their needs.

What became most evident in Beijing is that women worldwide have joined forces to develop common strategies for the advancement of women. The strength of this global network was visible in Beijing as the non-governmental organisations effectively lobbied to ensure that governments did not develop selective amnesia on gains made in other UN conferences leading up to Beijing. The three most contentious issues in the negotiations of the Beijing Platform were summed up by Patricia Licuanan, chair of the Main Committee, as "the three R's": Rights, Reproduction and Resources.

The Vienna Declaration, for example, states that women's rights are universal human rights, and the document which came out of Cairo stated that women should have control over their sexual and reproductive rights. Many government delegations from predominantly Catholic countries and the Muslim world came to Beijing intent on reversing these gains in the Beijing Platform.

Governments in Beijing also came prepared to repeat the pattern set in major UN conferences since UNCED of refusing to commit new and additional resources. One of the major reasons given by governments, especially in the developing world, and women's organisations for not implementing the 1985 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, was the lack of resources. In Beijing, women argued that governments and international agencies in the North should not repeat the same mistake, especially given the difficult economic climate in most countries in the South where women are greatly disadvantaged.

Women also called on governments to re-allocate and adjust the use of current resources to ensure that more funds are allocated to areas which would push women forward - education, health, etc. This could be more easily accomplished, women said in Beijing, if governments worldwide would reduce military spending. On average it has been estimated that governments in the developing world allocate only about 10% of their budgets to meet the basic needs of people. More is spent on the military and debt servicing than sectors like health and education.

Through caucuses, informal networks and through their representation on government delegations in Beijing, women became the linchpin in the develop-

ment of a global blueprint for women's advancement to the 21st century. But according to Sara Longwe, a gender activist and development consultant from Zambia, although the Beijing Platform will provide the entry spaces for change, there is a lot of work to be done on the ground. "The actions taken should look at the reconstruction of the given, and new structures are needed to bring the results we want," Longwe said, adding that, "even a woman with a PH.D. is beaten, not allowed to own property in her own right in some countries."

Longwe also pointed out however that there have been several positive changes in the global scenario since the 1985 Nairobi Women's Conference that could be the catalyst to move the Beijing Platform forward. She continues,

"The women's movement is at its peak; it is more mature and there has been a new revival of the progressive spirit of the 1960s all over again. The women's movement also has adopted the new approach of gender relations and does not just isolate women's issues.

There is also the acceptance of gender discrimination in both the North and the South, making for stronger alliances, there are more (international) conventions (on women's rights and equality) which governments have signed, and now there are men in the women's movement, which was not so much the case in 1985. Women now are not alone in the battle for equality."

The Beijing Platform outlines 12 critical areas of concern for women to make progress: poverty, education, health care, violence against women, effects of conflict on women, power-sharing and decision-making, mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, human rights, mass media, women's management of natural resources and the environment, and the girl child.

This Platform, however, will not provide all the answers for every country and every region. Regions as well as national governments will have to prioritise from the global policy framework the first steps forward.

Beijing and Africa: Bringing Beijing Back Home

Africa faces the greatest challenge in integrating women into the development process. The Fourth World Conference on Women was just the beginning of the long and steep road African countries must vehemently travel in the coming decade, if the continent is to begin to make some progress in pulling itself out of a quagmire of spiralling decline. Like all international conferences, Beijing only provided the window through which Africa could reflect upon its own successes and failures in the advancement of women, it provided Africa with a yardstick to measure its commitment to women's advancement.

Comprising a little more than 50 percent of the continent's more than 600 million people, women are the key to the locked doors of development in Africa.

Once their capacities are strengthened and their equal partnership in the development process realised, new roads to economic and social development would be unveiled. Sadly, it has taken many leaders in Africa a long time to come to the realisation that women matter. During the last decade, governments have slowly started to show an increasing tendency to see the political and socio-economic participation of women as a key factor and catalyst in the processes and linkages that engender and encourage equality, health and development and peace for the accelerated advancement of women.¹

During the years that it has taken for Africa to wake up to the gender dimension of development policies, the continent has paid a huge price. The majority of African countries fall into the category of poor countries as per capita incomes plummet, economic growth ceases, and as the external debt, which stood at US\$285.4 billion in 1993, hangs over the continent like a giant club.

Africa's women have paid the highest price for the continent's underdevelopment. The continent has the world's highest fertility rate, the highest infant mortality rate, the highest maternal mortality rate and one of the highest dependency ratios.² Despite the large educational drives of the 1960s and 1970s, 56% of African women are still illiterate; the number of female-headed households has steadily increased to a regional average of around 35%.³ Women are the backbone of Africa. They grow most of the continent's food, providing food security at the household level, and they are the caregivers and nurturers of the larger society. Yet their reward has been largely to remain as receivers at the lower end of the development process.

Africa too has had its fair share of regional conferences on the situation of women. The first Regional Conference on the Integration of Women in Development was held in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in 1977 to review progress made by African governments and non-governmental organisations in the implementation of the 1975 Mexico World Plan of Action. A series of regional conferences followed: Lusaka, 1979; Arusha, Tanzania, in 1984; and Abuja, Nigeria in 1989. The Abuja Conference, which was Africa's Fourth Regional Conference on Women, adopted the Abuja Declaration on Participatory Development: The Role of Women in Africa in the 1990s. This document's objectives were to define targets to be achieved in various sectors by the year 2000 in the areas of education, science, technology, agriculture and food production, environment, decision making and mainstreaming, population issues, women and culture.⁴

The Fifth Regional Conference on Women was held in November 1994 in Dakar, Senegal. This meeting, which was to set out Africa's agenda for women's advancement in the 21st century, as well as serve as the platform for negotiating Africa's issues of concern into the global platform, was held against a backdrop of increasing poverty and setbacks in many areas of social development.

Although it is stated in the African Platform for Action that the critical areas of concern outlined are interdependent and are of equal priority, the order of presentation reflects the concerns of African women.⁵ Poverty tops the list. According to the 1995 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, poverty has a woman's face. Of the 1.3 billion people in poverty, 70% are women. The increasing poverty among women has been linked to their unequal situation in the labour market, their treatment under social welfare systems and their status and power in the family.⁶

The African Platform recognises that as long as women remain poor, they will continue to remain shackled by oppression and discrimination in all spheres. Poverty keeps women locked into a vicious cycle of dependency. At the family level, due to lack of education and skills training, women become dependent on men for their economic survival. At the national level, they are often dependent on either the government or international donors to provide money for projects and programmes to sustain them. When these programmes come to an end, women often have not been imbued with any skills to sustain themselves and fall back into a worse situation of poverty and dependency. Poverty affects women's health, making them most vulnerable to contracting diseases and dying early. They are unable to feed their children or provide adequate primary health care, and poor women tend to have large numbers of children to compensate for a high infant mortality.

Economic empowerment of women was one of the major topics discussed in Dakar, both at the NGO Forum and at the intergovernmental negotiations. Women in Africa must be empowered to participate in economic structures, policy formulation and in the productive process itself. The African Platform for Action, in line with the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and the Abuja Declaration, emphasizes the economic empowerment of women through stimulating, consolidating and coordinating the entrepreneurial spirit and skills of African women and providing adequate access to both formal and informal sector resources.⁷ Women entrepreneurs from throughout Africa, who set up small stalls to sell their cloth, handicrafts, and food items to the many visitors who gathered in Dakar, demonstrated that economic muscle for women is not a far-fetched dream. These activities, which women engage in daily across the continent, also reveal the spirit of women to earn their living through their own skills rather than through welfare assistance which is not self-sustaining.

Despite the organisational hiccups in Dakar, African leaders and the representatives from the NGO movement got down to the serious task of mapping out a strategy for Africa. The African Platform for Action specifically addresses Africa's problems and recommends strategies that take into account Africa's ability to mobilise resources, its political and economic framework, and the strength of its growing non-governmental organisations. In the Southern African

Development Community (SADC) alone, excluding Angola, Mozambique and Mauritius, there are 699 NGOs, of which 130 deal directly with women.⁸ Women within the African NGO network believe that the African Platform for Action will provide the launching pad for many of the post-Beijing strategies for the continent. This document must not be the backburners. It must be analysed and read in conjunction with the Beijing Platform for Action.

The international stage in the last decade has become the arena for devising global political and economic policy, including policy on human rights, women, the environment, and reproductive and health issues. Africa has been present at all of the global meetings but has not been a major player in the negotiations of policy. To a large extent, Africa still remains on the fringe of global development, given its political and economic instability, and it has lacked the technical expertise and commitment to approach international conferences and the negotiations of conventions with its own agenda. While African women activists believe that the Beijing Platform does reflect the continent's concerns, they also point out that for priority areas, strategies and a starting point for change, the African Platform for Action must provide the launching pad for African women's development.

Translating Beijing in Africa: The Need for A Strong Women's Movement

Ugandan NGO activist Algresia Akwi maintains that women in African can no longer continue to talk about the problems. The emphasis now, she says, must be on the "solutions."

While it has been clearly spelt out in many international platforms and conventions what governments must do to remove all forms of discrimination against women and to put in place policies and programmes for mainstreaming women's issues, it is strong constituency-based movements outside of government which move programmes into action. These movements provide the base for policy formulation that speaks directly to the needs of the people concerned, and they are able to monitor and evaluate programmes so that governments are held accountable.

African women must form a coherent strategy to formalise and build a strong women's movement on the continent. The first lesson in any movement for change is that those effected by unjust and discriminatory policies must be at the forefront in prioritizing their emancipation and empowerment. Women must come to their own rescue as a group and press for change for their own betterment.⁹ To do this effectively, however, African women need to create their own structures which can provide the base for a women's network on the continent.

Internationally, the women's movement has become a forceful tool for communications, education, lobbying and advocacy on women's issues. At the 1995 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, there were only about 300 women NGOs. But by the time Beijing rolled around, the numbers had swelled to 3000. These women have effectively used the growing telecommunications industry to their advantage by networking and exchanging data and ideas on a variety of issues. In Beijing, the international women's movement, which comprised women primarily from North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Australia, illustrated its new strength through its ability to caucus and influence the negotiations of governments. Much of the positive language in the Beijing Platform for Action on reproductive health, human rights, counting women's unpaid labour in national statistics, etc. is due to the lobbying of this international network of women.

African women for the most part are on the fringe of the international women's movement. African women activists from various countries are linked into the women's movement through their work with many international networks, but this is a far cry from a forceful bloc emerging from the continent itself, with a broad-based constituency of African women. A power base at home, established on a foundation starting from the grassroots to the international level, is one of the first agendas African women face, post-Beijing. Building a strong continental women's movement can act as a catalyst for fundamental change on several levels.

Women's exclusion from the male-dominated professional networks and information channels is a major barrier to their career advancement to key decision-making positions. One of the main strategies for overcoming this barrier is the need for women to create their own networks in sharing and gathering information and in strengthening their organisations. These networks can then serve as the training ground and recruitment organs for women who can participate in high-level decision-making positions in a way that can bring change on matters of gender equity.¹⁰

Also, although governments must play their part in women's advancement, African women now realise, based on their experiences of the last decade, that the complete reliance on the goodwill of policy makers and employers, many of whom are men, may bring some reforms, but not fundamental changes. Women must act as the watchdogs of society to monitor implementation of gender equity policies.¹¹

The nascent characteristics of an African women's movement and its potential are evident in the growth of women's non-governmental organisations in the last decade. This mushrooming of women's organisations is perhaps consistent with the democratic principle of freedom of association and the broadening of political space for women. But women's groups must be careful not to split into political

factions. While political allegiance may have its benefits, it is important for women across the political divide to network and form strong ties around the issue of gender. They must work as one force to effectively pursue change in discriminatory policies and practices. Otherwise, a growing women's movement can be snuffed out half-way through divide and rule tactics.

An African women's movement must also avoid the danger of forgetting where its real power-base lies. Urban-based women's struggles must be linked to the rural areas where the majority of Africa's women still live. A truly representative women's movement can take the first step in removing the rural-urban divide that has characterised Africa's political, economic and social development during the last decade.

Learning from others: Tackling the Issues and Building Alliances

A strong African women's movement that is linked to the diaspora, like the Pan-African Women's Liberation Organisation (PAWLO), can give a strong voice to the African woman's agenda within the international arena.

The high stakes of international policy require visibility, lobbying and advocacy at the international level, all currently weak points in Africa. But there is no need for African women entering the arena to re-invent the wheel. There are many lessons to learn from women in Latin America and Asia, regions which experience many of the same developmental problems as Africa, and these are also regions where women have had to confront similar traditions, attitudes and discriminatory practices which have held women back.

One important lesson that women from Asia and Latin America brought to Beijing was the need for women's NGOs to build a strong constituency base in both the rural and urban areas. Women with education, skills and expertise have channelled their efforts into uplifting their rural counterparts. This has been seen as the first step towards building a foundation for the sustainability of their programmes. By identifying and working with women at the community-based level to transfer skills, even though the organisation may be based in the urban centre, it has created a network in the rural areas which continues to work on the ground among the majority of people to change attitudes.

Women in these regions have also worked consistently around a priority area of concern, building a strong knowledge-base in this area, as well as fine-tuning lobbying and advocacy tactics. For the women in Asia, this has been economic development and the effect of World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies and programmes on their country, and specifically women. The women of Asia have been instrumental in spearheading debate and discussion on this area at the national, regional and international levels, and they have also formulated and placed on the table alternative economic policies through DAWN (Development Alternatives Women's Network). Latin American women worked in a

similar fashion around Women's Health and Reproductive Rights, which proved to be most effective at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and in Beijing. Coming from predominantly Catholic countries, Latin American women had built up a strong constituency among Catholic women from all strata in their countries to effectively challenge the Church's conservative stance on reproductive health.

Internationally, women in both regions have learned well the art of coalition politics. To push their own issues and interests, these women have found allies internationally to join forces. This too is an important lesson for women in Africa. Given the continent's lack of resources, technical expertise (the brain drain has robbed the continent of a large pool of talent in many fields), poor communications and infrastructure, and its uneven economic and social development, African women cannot afford to go it alone.

Mainstreaming gender in the next decade also calls for African women to form alliances with men. Although women have to be at the lead of any struggle for their own empowerment, they must form alliances with marginalised men involved in workers' rights and human rights activities to begin to integrate the concept of gender into all struggles for a just and equal society. Much of the backlash towards a women's movement in Africa has been due to more of a lack of understanding of the nature of the struggle for women's rights. African men have quickly dismissed women's right to development as a Western ideology, without truly coming to grips with the fact that the continent's constant stagnation has a great deal to do with African countries' inability to unleash the capacity of more than half of its population. One's right to development is a human issue, based on a humanistic vision of a society where the playing field is level for all to participate in and develop equally. This is the context in which men must begin to understand the struggle for women's equality and development; and it is a vision Africa must work towards in the next decade, if it is to stop its spiralling decline on all levels.

The African women's movement must also work within a limited resource base to build up information on its priority issues to correct Africa's repeated pattern of sitting at the table of global policy uninformed. Stories abound of African delegations attending international meetings with no clue on the subject matter, and no skills to negotiate. At the end of the day, African delegations sign documents, which do not always have their interests at heart, and return home where there is no machinery to translate documents into action plans to meet the realities at home.

African women within government and other organisations must begin to break this cycle of Africa waking up too late on the international scene. Women must be at the forefront of building the capacity of all to participate, and not continue to hoard an illusory power base close to the chest of a few.

Beijing will only become the reality that African women make it. No longer can women afford to sit back and let their future be determined. While it is true that the political, economic and social situation of women in Africa on the face of it reeks of disempowerment, women have garnished the strength to push onward and to survive against incredible odds.

The African Platform for Action is a testimony to the fact that despite the regional differences among women - for example in North Africa and parts of West Africa, women must confront political, economic, social and religious oppression - the strength of an African women's movement lies in the priority issues of concern which cross the regional divide. This diversity also can serve an African women's movement well in the international arena.

Unleashing this strength must be the focus of African women's groups in the coming decade. Beijing and international conferences like it, only provide the entry spaces for the work on the ground to become stronger and focused in the years ahead.

Notes

1. 1994 African Common Position for the Advancement of Women, Dakar Senegal, November 1994, p.6.
2. African Common Position, p.12
3. African Common Position, p.8
4. African Common Position, p.3
5. African Common Position, p.7
6. 1995 UNDP Human Development Report, p.4
7. 1994 African Common Position for the Advancement of Women, Dakar Senegal, November 1994, p.9
8. Magdalena Kamugisha Rwebangira (1994). Using the Reporting Process to Highlight the Principles of the Women's Convention: The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations, paper presented at the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) workshop, African Preparatory Meeting, Dakar, Senegal, p.2.
9. Political Empowerment of Women, Conference Paper on Priority Issues, UNEconomic Commission for Africa, Africa Centre for Women, November 1994, p.ii.
10. Political Empowerment of Women, p.38
11. Political Empowerment of Women