

From World Conferences to ‘Generation Equality’: Defending Beijing and building a new feminist agenda

Sanam Amin, PhD candidate, University of Melbourne

sanamaraa@student.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges that the successes of Beijing have posed to progressive feminist movements, as the attacks on multilateralism and women’s rights have over two decades forced feminists to continually defend the framework adopted in 1995 rather than build new commitments beyond it. It covers some of the developments in the process of the Beijing + 25 review based on my direct experiences and conversations with feminist activists, and considers where the next global feminist agenda can take form.

Introduction

A quarter of a century after the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) seems not only very progressive, but also impossible to replicate in the current geopolitical climate. Feminist activists who were present in 1995 have expressed that they expected Beijing to be the stepping stone to something new; instead, it has become the ceiling, the limit to what governments will agree to, and has pushed progressive feminist groups to be defensive of the 1995 commitments (IWHC, 2020).

Monitoring and five-year reviews of the BPfA commitments are mandated to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), one of the oldest UN Commissions. The CSW remains the biggest intergovernmental policymaking space on women’s rights till today; but, a generation or two ago civil society was able to use the CSW space to develop the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and shape dedicated UN mandates such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of violence against women, its causes and consequences. In the most recent reviews, on the 20th and 25th anniversaries of the BPfA, civil society was often excluded, and the resulting political declarations lacked serious commitment (Foerde, 2015). This is a stark contrast to 1995, where although there were gaps and challenges for many constituencies and feminist movements, on the whole civil society was able

to help shape the text of the Declaration and Platform for Action. The political context in 2020, with rising authoritarianism, disinformation, strengthened extremist groups from neo-Nazis to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and continued attacks on multilateralism, is a stark contrast to 1995, which was a “highpoint of post-Cold War optimism about the phenomenal problem-solving that could be achieved through international co-operation” (Sandler & Goetz, 2020).

In 2019, following calls for a Fifth World Conference on Women, UN Women instead initiated a ‘hybrid’ conference, the ‘Gender Equality Forum’, which later was confirmed as the ‘Generation Equality Forum’.¹ Originally meant to be hosted in 2020 by Mexico and France, this not necessarily a new feminist agenda, but a strategy to move away from the quagmire of intergovernmental spaces where consensus building has been eroding existing commitments. This paper will summarise some of the challenges that have emerged in the intergovernmental spaces on women’s rights and examine how the successes of the BPfA have limited progressive feminist movements, and where the next global feminist agenda can take form, using information gathered from participation in CSW and BPfA review processes in the last five years.

Methodology

This paper makes references to existing literature on Beijing, particularly from articles in the July 2020 issue of *Gender & Development* on Beijing + 25. It is also based on my personal observations from the last four years as a civil society organiser involved in the regional and global feminist organizing around Beijing + 25 review, during which I served as chair of the Asia Pacific Civil Society Steering Committee on Beijing + 25, on the selection committee for the Generation Equality Civil Society Advisory Group, and as co-convener of the Women’s Rights Caucus on CSW.

¹ Generation Equality Forum website: <https://forum.generationequality.org/home>

Backlash and backtrack

The success of developing a progressive framework like the Beijing Platform for Action, with global commitment to the agenda, had its opponents, particularly around the use of the term ‘gender’ (Baden & Goetz, 1997). The victories were hard won, but the key opponents to ‘gender mainstreaming’ and other areas of progressive development, have used the years that have followed to organise against, and divide and separate issues as much as possible. This has been visible, for instance, at the insistence at CSW61 (where the theme was ‘Women and the world of work’) to remove references to the ILO; at the regional Beijing + 25 review, when some delegates suggested climate issues belong to UNFCCC and should be removed from the Beijing + 25 political declaration. Generally, the effort has been for the work and outcomes of CSW to focus on a narrow range of women’s issues. Sometimes, this tactic of division is evidently meant to hinder progress, such as the efforts to weed out any commitments on women human rights defenders or on women, peace and security: delegations representing authoritarian governments have often insisted on removing those terms or reducing any mention to a cursory preambular listing, rather than making any new commitments on these issues.

Even leaving out the actions of anti-women’s rights groups, dividing linked issues is a reductive approach that ally organisations and presumably progressive governments also use, to simplify their work and not overturn any existing structures of power. Often, support for women’s issues is fixed within the narrow limits of violence against women and trafficking. This depoliticised, reductive approach is reinforced by funding based on these themes, such as by the Spotlight Initiative, which has chosen “focus areas as entry points to combat the continuum of VAWG” (Spotlight Initiative Annual Report 2017-2018). Asia has been assigned trafficking and sexual and labour exploitation; the Caribbean has been assigned family violence, Latin America’s focus area is femicide and for the Pacific it is domestic violence. Not only does this seem somewhat close to stereotyping, the work on these themes is divorced from structural analysis or linkage to the economic systems and regulations that entrench violent practices. Governments that are declaring commitment to feminist foreign policy are offering a very narrow idea of what it means to be feminist; any attempt, for example, to engage with ministries of finance, trade, or economics would immediately reveal that the commitment to feminism is not across the board.

In addition, since 2016, the US has implemented a discriminatory ‘Muslim ban’ restricting travel from a number of countries. Following the rollout of this ban, several members of civil society were refused US visas despite submitting their UN registration for CSW (Jha, 2019), in contradiction to the commitments made in the UN-US Headquarters agreement.² Access to UN meetings in New York was already restricted to those who had the means and privileges to travel and receive funding to attend; this measure has meant that participation in the biggest policymaking space on women’s rights has become even more limited to those in the global north.

The regressive groups, over the years forming an unholy alliance of the Vatican, Russia, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the US (Kirkpatrick, 2019), have found new battles to fight, for example splitting up ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’ into ‘sexual health and reproductive rights’ or other variations that oppose abortion as part of healthcare, comprehensive sexuality education, and so on. These tactics have led to feminist movements becoming defensive in intergovernmental spaces, fighting to hold on to the same ground as 25 years ago with the repeated mantra, ‘it’s agreed language’. With more right-wing and anti-democratic, anti-human rights political figures in power, there are fewer career diplomats attending these negotiations, and more political appointees who do not follow the fallback position of accepting ‘agreed language’ from the BPfA or other UN resolutions. The US has appointed problematic delegates such as anti-trans activist Bethany Kozma to their 2017 delegation (OutRight International, 2018); and in 2019, during the Asia Pacific regional review process for the Beijing + 25 review, they called a vote on the outcome document after delegates had stayed up overnight negotiating and coming to an agreement. This was an unprecedented action: several other delegates asked the US to reconsider their action and show support for the hard won consensus but were met with refusal. Their reason was the objection to the term ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’, although this term has been used in the BPfA and in the International Conference on Population and Development documents before. The chair acknowledged that it is the sovereign right of every member state to call for a vote: the recorded vote was 37 for the adoption of the document, and only one against (UNESCAP 2020).

² UN-US Headquarters Agreement (1947). Available online: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2011/volume-11-I-147-English.pdf>

In 25 years, while there has been some change in addressing gender-blind policies, and in the setup of gender machineries in many countries, of the 12 critical areas of concern, most have seen backtracking. Similarly, the first five year report on the 2030 Agenda shows that several of the Sustainable Development Goals are not on target to be met. Environmental degradation has become an existential threat to the entire planet; the ‘war on terror’ increased conflict, militarism and fundamentalism; democracies came under attack from authoritarians, including through digital means; economic inequality widened even as wealth and productivity increased; attacks on multilateralism increased. Almost symbolically, the CSW meeting in March 2020 where the global review of the BPfA was supposed to take place, was the very first UN meeting to be cancelled in the face of the Covid-19 global pandemic that has swept across the world. The data gathered so far shows that from the very first moments, response to the crisis relied on women, whether by stepping up to the increased burden of domestic and care work at home, as front line essential workers, or as community organisers building knowledge about the disease, and creating emergency support systems (Carey, 2020). The developments summarised in this section do show that even without a pandemic, the state of women’s rights was in crisis.

#FeministsWantSystemChange

In 2002, Barbara Epstein observed that “[t]here is no longer an organized feminist movement in the United States that influences the lives and actions of millions of women and engages their political support.” (Epstein 2002) Jumping forward fifteen years, we see global feminist organising of women who have never organised before (the #MeToo movement), the revitalisation of efforts from decades ago, as well as new initiatives and campaigns worldwide that called feminists to the streets with the rage of generations: the Women’s March, Ni En More (Not One More), I Will Go Out, the Women’s Global Strike. There is a diverse global feminist movement in 2020, which is organised and is bringing depth of analysis to a wide range of issues, at national, regional and international levels. Yet, there is no global space akin to the four World Conferences on Women of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, to bring together the different movements to strategise as they did in the NGO Forum in 1994, and to work with government to develop policy on women’s human rights as they did in Beijing.

In this context, in 2019 UN Women approached governments, donors and civil society with its proposal of a ‘Gender Equality Forum’ (since renamed ‘Generation Equality’), presenting a roadmap of the constellation of anniversaries coming up in 2020. The 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action was a special one, as it was a moment for intergenerational learning, and in some ways, passing of the torch: the ‘Beijing babies’, the activists who were at Beijing, and millennial and Generation Z young feminists, collectively organised around the key message of feminist movements for this pivotal year: “Feminists Want System Change”.

Feminist movements connected through the Women’s Major Group on Sustainable Development, the Women’s Rights Caucus, and other coalitions, brought forward this overarching campaign message linking the BPfA, the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP), and Generation Equality. The challenges were not only coming from the right-wing groups who opposed women’s fundamental freedoms; internally, the struggle between older and younger feminists has not always resolved itself well. One of the emerging fractures as civil society organised for Beijing + 25 and participated in the formation of advisory groups for Generation Equality, was the inclusion of sex workers in these processes and structures. The sex work disagreement has been pushed under the carpet for a long time, and the appeal to the ‘agree to disagree’ did not stick: several groups that claim to be anti-trafficking sent UN Women a letter (Crossette, October 2019) with annexes that included confidential advocacy documents and names and personal details of activists involved in drafting those documents. This was a breach of trust that caused division; in addition, it resulted in UN Women putting out a letter claiming neutrality on the issue, after a previous internal memo from 2013 had suggested to use the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ (Crossette, November 2019). The insistence of opponents on using the term ‘prostitution’ and conflation of sex work and trafficking has led some feminists in these spaces to suggest that this issue may have to be resolved and a feminist position defined that does not exclude sex workers from feminist movements and intergovernmental spaces.

These kinds of discussions and analysis on what should be feminist praxis, including in a digital age, are not taking place in the intergovernmental spaces nor in many national contexts

due to the constant battle of holding on to the few gains and commitments made in Beijing and through CEDAW and other human rights instruments. The real threat of backsliding, combined with the effort to try find middle ground and consensus, has meant that feminist movements have had to constantly run a mile a minute to stay in the same place. Multilateralism coming under attack, and nationalist, protectionist approaches rising has meant that even more is at stake for women's rights. The final political declaration on the 25th anniversary of Beijing was so limited and inadequate that feminist movements chose to draft their own Feminist Declaration that

The Generation Equality Forum, which has formed six thematic 'Action Coalitions' bringing together governments, donors, the private sector and civil society, is attempting a different kind of modality to try and break away from this stalemate. Yet when there is such a gap of power, knowledge, resources and understanding in one space, it becomes difficult to build a new feminist agenda that is of its time and breaks new ground that even the BPfA did not.

Conclusion

The feminist movement has been forced to continuously defend the commitments made in the BPfA for a quarter of a century. Despite the initial momentum in the first few years after it was adopted, there has been backtracking on several of the 12 areas identified, progress has been uneven, and it has not been irreversible. The defensive struggle takes place in a global context where authoritarianism and attacks on democracy and human rights are on the rise, and little funding for feminist movements to come together and build a new feminist agenda. The proposed Generation Equality Forum, while innovative in its approach to try and avoid the restrictions of official intergovernmental processes, would still not match the previous World Conferences on Women in terms of funding or numbers of participants. In the context of the pandemic, it is also difficult to move ahead with the original plans of bringing together women's organisations, especially when many are now subsumed in front line response work, in many countries filling in gaps for support on domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence during lockdowns.

Yet the existing organising that feminist networks have done, have coalesced around the need for a system change approach, and a rejection of siloes, as every issue is a women's rights

issue. These siloes have been created and reinforced by both progressive and regressive governments and stakeholders, despite international frameworks from the BPfA to the 2030 Agenda having commitments to a holistic approach. For a new, progressive feminist agenda, it is vital to support movements worldwide to both have their own space to strategise, and to give way in the intergovernmental spaces where civil society has been kept out of decision-making for too long.

References:

Carey, R., 2020. Is Freedom A Casualty In The Fight Against Coronavirus?. [online] Aljazeera.com. Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/episode/2020/4/28/is-freedom-a-casualty-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus>

Crossette, Barbara. (October 2019). ‘UN Women Is Criticized for Appearing to Take Sides on Decriminalizing ‘Sex Work’’. Passblue. Available online: <https://www.passblue.com/2019/10/17/un-women-is-criticized-for-appearing-to-take-sides-on-decriminalizing-sex-work/>

Crossette, Barbara. (November 2019). ‘UN Women Declares Its Neutrality in the Sex Trade Debate’’. Passblue. Available online: <https://www.passblue.com/2019/11/11/un-women-declares-its-neutrality-in-the-sex-trade-debate/>

Epstein, Barbara. (2002) ‘Feminist Consciousness After the Women’s Movement’’. Monthly Review. Volume 54, Number 4. Available online: <https://monthlyreview.org/2002/09/01/feminist-consciousness-after-the-womens-movement/>

Foerde, Janice G. (2015) ‘CSW 2015 celebrated Beijing+20 with record large participation but limited space for CSOs’’. WIDE+. Available online: <https://wideplus.org/2015/03/29/csw-2015-celebrated-beijing20-with-record-large-participation-but-limited-space-for-csos/>

International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC). (2020). Press release: ‘Women’s Rights Caucus Issues Feminist Declaration Marking 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and

Platform for Action'. Available online: <https://iwhc.org/press-releases/womens-rights-caucus-issues-feminist-declaration-marking-25th-anniversary-of-the-beijing-declaration-and-platform-for-action/> accessed 13 July

Jha, Nishita. (2019) 'The US Denied Visas To Women From Africa And The Middle East Hoping To Attend The UN's Women Conference.' BuzzFeed News.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/un-women-conference-visas-denied>

Kirkpatrick, Laura. (2019). 'The US Goes 'Bonkers' at the UN Women's Conference'. Passblue.
<https://www.passblue.com/2019/03/24/the-us-goes-bonkers-at-the-un-womens-conference/>

OutRight International. (2017). 'Stop Anti-Trans Delegate Bethany Kozma from Representing the US at CSW'. Available online: <https://outrightinternational.org/content/stop-anti-trans-delegate-bethany-kozma-representing-us-csw>

Sandler, J., & Goetz, A. M. (2020). 'Can the United Nations deliver a feminist future?'. *Gender & Development*, 28(2), 239–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2020.1753432>

Spotlight Initiative. (2018). Annual Report 2017-2018. Available online:
https://spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/Spotlight_Annual_Report_July_2017-March_2018.pdf

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). (2020). *Report of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+25 Review*. ESCAP/MCBR/2019/2/Rev.1 Available online:
https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Report_of_Beijing%2B25_%28ENG%29_20200113.pdf