

BOOK REVIEW

How Beijing has been Betrayed

WEDO's new book carries women's reports on how governments have failed to act on the BPFA.

by Rosanna Langara

The 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in March 2005, New York focused on two key issues—the review of the implementation of the “Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)” and the outcome documents of the special sessions of the UN General Assembly. Significantly, the UNCSW assembly also witnessed the launching of the book “Beijing Betrayed: Women Worldwide Report that Governments Failed to Turn the Platform into Action.” The book is the fifth in a series published by the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) that assesses the progress of governments in implementing the commitments that they made to the world’s women at the “Fourth World Conference on Women,” 1995.

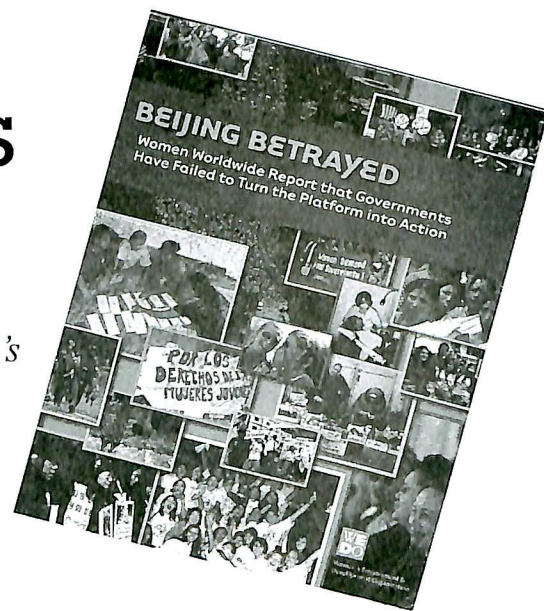
In co-operation with women’s groups around the world, WEDO, an international organisation that advocates women’s equality in global policy, compiles in this book 17 subregional reports with presentations from women in 150 countries from every region in the world. The result is an intensive

documentation of women’s concerns, experiences, perspectives, and actual conditions in the BPFA implementation process. “Beijing Betrayed” depicts how a confluence of factors contributed to reducing the BPFA gains and increasing the gaps towards achieving women’s empowerment. As the book’s subtitle suggests, the inaction of governments has been a major stumbling block. Disappointingly, governments have reneged on the promises they made in Beijing, thus betraying women all over the world.

Looking at Women in Different Regions, “Beijing Betrayed” outlines to its readers the struggles and challenges confronting women in various regions.

Africa

In Eastern Africa, women’s status is still low, and lack of education contributes to women’s poverty, which has increased over the past 10 years. There is little awareness of international conventions that protect women’s rights, and the government and nongovernment organisations (NGOs) have also not acted to promote these conventions,



save for the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).”

North African countries have already recognised the importance of gender equality, education, health and women’s empowerment since their adoption of the BPF and the UN “Millennium Declaration.” But the book also stresses that economic globalisation has worsened the living conditions for women across the board despite the modest gains towards gender equality and women’s empowerment in the region.

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) is said to have seen some progress in the advancement of women’s rights. Women have also contributed to improving the economy, but gender imbalances continue to persist.

The West African subregion has had a blooming of NGOs working for a culture that respects women’s rights. Education is one of the areas where considerable progress has been achieved. Unfortunately, women still have poor access to health care because of several factors that have led to the continuing high rate of maternal mortality, especially in the rural areas.

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Asia and the Pacific

While Central Asia governments generally condemn violence against women (VAW) and endorse prevention of such acts, VAW is still prevalent. Current law enforcement practices treat domestic violence indulgently, and governments lack programmes to train judicial, legal, medical, social, educational, police, and immigrant personnel on dealing with VAW, so the book explains.

Despite legal gains in East Asia, monitoring and implementation continue to be a problem. In this subregion, it is said that many of the improvements, especially on advancing women’s rights, can be attributed to the work of women’s NGOs and not to governments.

In South Asia, women’s movements have also had good results in pressuring their governments to enact legal reforms in for women’s rights. Among the many issues that legislation now addresses are discrimination, women’s health care and rights, dowry, violence, rape, trafficking, land and water rights, and reserved political seats for women. Yet, as in other regions, implementation and enforcement of laws remain difficult.

South East Asia has seen varying levels of legal advances, with the greatest struggles being those of indigenous, minority, and immigrant women. Again, the book reiterates that entrenched gender inequalities throughout existing social, religious, cultural, and political structures obstruct the practice of policies.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, the book reports that violence against women and children, and sexually transmitted

infections are distressingly widespread. Migrant and refugee women, women with disabilities, Pacific Islands women, and older women continue to confront distinct issues.

Women in the Pacific Islands and Territories face new and ongoing challenges that include domestic and civil violence, lack of political participation and involvement in decision-making, lack of property rights, and the effects of globalisation and trade liberalisation.

Europe and North America

For women in the Commonwealth of Independent States, conditions have actually worsened in many ways since the BPFA, the book relates. The last decade being a time of dramatic economic, political, and social upheavals, constitutional guarantees of women's equality were found to be insufficient in containing the damage to women's social, economic, and political standing.

In the European Union, developments in the last decade have started to slow the progress towards gender equality. Central to European economic policies is the trend towards market liberalisation and privatisation, and the general reduction of funding for public services. These developments are proving to be a major barrier to women's economic independence and to the achievement of gender equality in different areas of life, including employment, public health, and the reduction of poverty. There is now a greater feminisation of poverty in Europe, less job security, and a

weakening of the European social model of social protection and public services, the book stresses.

In Canada, the situation of aboriginal women is viewed as one of the markers of the country's failure in advancing the rights of all women. National aboriginal women's groups are still frequently excluded from the political arena, and continue to experience discriminatory federal funding.

Under the current administration in the U.S., consideration of CEDAW is stalled. There is massive loss of jobs, particularly in the public sector that has displaced women workers and pushed them into lower paying service sector jobs with little job security or benefits, says the WEDO book.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Caribbean women find that the economic downturn in the region means a greater struggle for survival and less time for political organising and mobilisation.

In Latin America, poverty is still the backdrop to many women's concerns. The region continues to have some of the world's greatest disparities in income. Unfortunately, it is the women who often bear the brunt of these trends, comprising the majority of the poor households.

West Asia

The continuation and expansion of military occupation in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, has made women's human's rights discourse more

difficult for local groups. One of the challenges for women's rights groups in West Asia is to work harder to ensure that their continued advocacy for gender equality in Arab countries does not equate with supporting Western military agendas.

"Beijing Betrayed" also Delves into the MDGs

As the "Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)" are becoming a powerful political tool to hold governments and international institutions as accountable, it is with concern that women observe that the MDGs do not reflect all of the recommendations of the BPFA, particularly those on reproductive rights. Apart from the BPFA, the MDGs' focus also sidesteps international agreements, such as the CEDAW and the "International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)." Women are now beginning to engage the UN for its increased commitment to link the 12 key issues of BPFA with the eight of the MDG.

Of late, the complexity of the challenges that women face has begun

to take its toll on the viability of the BPFA's realisation. The neo-liberal macroeconomic policies, the unilateralist tactics being practiced under the guise of "war on terror," and the conservative backlash on the women's movement have set back even further the women's gains. Given the failure of governments to turn the BPFA into action, reaffirming women's solidarity and organising them for the future is central to recover past gains.

Facts and figures on women's current realities are important instruments to gauge the gaps and gains that women continue to face. In any event, a holistic view on women's achievements and challenges remain the order of the day if women are to aim moving forward and pursuing the objectives outlined in the BPFA.

Finally, in light of the fact that the Beijing ten-year review is coinciding with the "Millennium Declaration" five-year review, reassessing the extent to which governments have upheld and implemented the agreements is integral. Foremost of which, women find it imperative to reconsider the integration of the BPFA in all of the MDGs. Otherwise, the MDGs will turn into another failed development paradigm.

"Beijing Betrayed" will serve as a most constructive tool in these endeavors. ☺

Source: "Beijing Betrayed: Women Worldwide Report that Governments Failed to Turn the Platform into Action" is downloadable from <http://www.wedo.org/library.aspx?ResourceID=31>

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