

Expert Group Meeting

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‘Beijing +30: Emerging issues and future directions for gender equality and women’s rights’

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**Beijing +30:  
Vitalizing Women’s Rights and the Gender Equality Agenda  
amid Transitions**

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\* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN-Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

# **1. From globalization to deglobalization and the challenges to multilateralism**

The Fourth World Conference on Women and other global conferences were held in 1990s when the Cold War just ended. It was also an era of accelerated globalization with imminent confidence that globalization and international cooperation could potentially provide the solutions to the common crises facing mankind. Thirty years later, these crises remain and even exacerbate, such as the ecological crisis, proliferations of nuclear weapons (The Economist 2024), and ongoing wars and intensifying human rights violations. Today, we are in the era of the deglobalization and rise of populism. The current international multilateral mechanism and international governance are undergoing serious damage and jeopardy. There is a lack of functional multilateral mechanisms, and even more so, an international solidarity that enables these mechanisms to function properly. The multipolar world is still developing, especially the rise of the global South (UNDP 2013, Webb 2016, Mohamadieh et al. 2021), but this process is not peaceful and smooth, but full of competition, confrontation and challenges. In addition, the increasing military spending is in glaring contrast to the decrease of the official development financing and fund for women's development and rights.

The most direct and ubiquitous challenge brought by this phenomenon to the women's rights and gender equality advocacy is: whether the previous advocacy strategies of the transnational women's movement that led to the historical victory in Beijing – adoption of Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) – are still effective or relevant today?

Many studies on the women's movement have pointed out that the combination of the advocacy of transnational feminist movements and local activism from global to local and from local to global is an important strategy in promoting the progress of women's rights (Merry 2006, Chesler and McGovern 2016). Resolutions, declarations, outcome documents adopted at international conferences, and global mechanisms to promote gender equality have played a great role in promoting regional, national, and local rights advocacy. Has this strategy become nullified in the current international context, when it is difficult to reach a consensus in almost any fields at the global level?

## **2. Transforming gender concept and norms – progress and setback**

The advocacy of the women's movement over the past 30 years has been transforming the traditional patriarchal and discriminatory gender concepts and norms. Many of these changes have been institutionalized through legislation and policies. For example, China passed its Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2015 and included the prohibition of sexual harassment in the revised Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interest in 2022. Both terms – domestic violence and sexual harassment – were unfamiliar by the public in China prior to the Beijing conference.

Another example is the recognition and redistribution of care work through laws and policies, in the SDG 5.4 target as well. The reality brought about by the decline in birth rate and the aging of the population propels the governments to take policy measures that recognize the value of care and reproductive work, such as modifying parental leave, providing childbirth compensation and social service, and ensuring that women are not punished in the labour market for their responsibilities of childbirth and care.

As we can see worldwide, every progress made in women's rights and gender equality is accompanied by regression and backlash (UN 2024), from so-call anti-gender ideology campaign (Roman and Paternotte 2017, Equal Rights Coalition 2022) to the rollback the abortion rights (OHCHR,2023), which mount the pushback the backlash such as international campaign for women's right to safe abortion.

What worth noting is the attitude of the younger generation. As some journalists and researchers (Kim 2024, Economist 2024) observed: Around the world, from the United States to China, to South Korea, to the United Kingdom, to Germany to Tunisia, in chat rooms and in the streets, the gender divide is widening as “Gen Zers split along political lines: Young women are increasingly swinging to the left, while young men are moving to the right – negating conventional wisdom that young people as a whole are more progressive than the generation before them” (Kim 2024). It does not mean to generalize and simplify the complicate dynamics. The more nuanced and sectional analyses are needed to understand this phenomenon to develop the appropriate strategy to engage with younger generation for gender equality and women's human rights.

This phenomenon at least partially due to the failures of neoliberalism, which provide a fertile ground for authoritarianism, illiberalism, and undemocratic ideas (Stiglitz 2024). The neoliberalism's failures manifesto economically (slow growth, increased inequality and monopolization), ecologically (degreed environment), as well as socially and politically (polarized society often through shunting the blame to women, especially women's sexual and bodily integrity and autonomy, to immigrants, and to other racial, gender, or religious minorities).

### **3. Technology advancement – from an accelerator for inequality and monopoly towards a feminist digital justice**

The rapid development and revolution of technology, especially in the field of new ICTs, artificial intelligence, algorithm, as well as competition in the field of technology bring tremendous opportunities and challenges for fulfilling women's rights and gender equality. However, it is never a fair race. Those players who have occupied political, economic and cultural advantages in the past have become even more far ahead in the new technological competition and enjoy a monopoly advantage. Those countries and communities that were previously in a disadvantaged position, including women and girls, especially those in the global South, have become even more disadvantaged and marginalized, subject to exacerbating inequality

and discrimination. DAWN and IT for Change have done substantive analyses in the project Feminist Digital Justice and developed the Declaration of Feminist Digital Justice, along with other partners.

#### **4. Rethinking the power dynamics among state, market, civil society, and remaking the social contract**

The experience of last three decades has also prompted women's rights advocates to rethink the traditional checks and balances between the state, the market and enterprises, and civil society, as well as the social contracts between them (Sen and Durano 2014, Rodríguez and Llaveneras 2023). Authoritarian and illiberal states are constantly expanding their rights, and the political space of civil society, including that of feminist and women's rights organizations is shrinking. At the same time, relying on the monopoly of capital and technology, the power of multinational corporations and digital giants has increased capturing and hijacking the development agendas, and profiting from peoples' daily life.

In addition, our understanding of some entities with political, economic or cultural influence (whether they are real or virtual) formed based on ideology, commercial interests, or technological monopoly also challenges our conventional view and definition of the state, governance of the market, and role of the civic groups. These entities can be groups like ISIS, policy lobbying groups, or online communities that are misogynistic and anti-gender equality and women's rights. And their operation methods and influence often go beyond the territory of a certain state. The influence of their operations and activities on women's rights and gender equality requires more in-depth research.

Thus, standing at the threshold of Beijing +30, the blunt question for the transnational feminist movement to answer is: Can transnational feminist movement and solidarity detoxify misogyny, patriarchy, militarism, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-liberal capitalism and take Beijing Platform for Action agenda forward?

In conclusion, in this challenging time, local mobilization and inter-movement building and transnational activism are more crucial than ever with focuses on the following three areas:

- (a) Creating the feminist analysis and knowledge on the new challenges and identifying the opportunities.
- (b) Institutionalizing the gains through laws and extent mechanisms at national, regional and global levels.
- (c) Strengthening the intergenerational dialogue and strategically engaging with younger generation recognizing their diversities and potentials.

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