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Beijing +30: Progress, Gaps and Challenges

Report of the Expert Group*

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Disclaimer

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

Summary

To mark the 30-year anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), a group of feminist activists, academics and women's human rights defenders came together for a three-day virtual expert group meeting to assess current progress on gender equality and analyse emerging opportunities and threats. This report was compiled by the experts to outline key recommendations for the accelerated implementation of the vision of the Beijing Declaration.

The report is strongly embedded in the contemporary global context, where efforts to advance gender equality are set against a deteriorating global landscape and cascading emergencies of violent conflict, climate-related disasters and food, fuel and financial crises. All of these crises have the most severe impacts on groups already facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, deepening poverty and inequality for those who have contributed least to such systems of harm while concentrating wealth and power in the hands of the few. In particular, the experts situate their recommendations in the context of the upsurge of violent conflict that is exacting a devastating toll on the lives of women and girls, including in Palestine and Sudan, and the severe backlash against gender equality and women's rights in numerous contexts, most emblematically in Afghanistan. They highlight that any future-oriented discussion of human rights must come with immediate action to end these catastrophic conflicts and to dismantle the misogyny, militarism and settler colonialism that drive them.

Recommendations laid out in the report cover five broad areas of action. The first is the need to advance the normative framework on gender equality, from the national to global level. Despite the important progress to repeal discriminatory laws and legislate against gender-based violence, the experts identify significant gaps regarding discriminatory family law, the evolution of digital technology and the urgent need for gender-responsive climate action, including on loss and damage. The second action area is around strengthening accountability, particularly in light of the rise in far-right politics entwined with backlash against the rights of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people. A renewed multilateral system fostering greater accountability for human rights protections is critical. Third, the experts call for strengthening intersectional and intergenerational women's movements, recognizing that such movements are critical to defending gains and breaking new ground and that a broad-based commitment to social, economic and environmental justice requires solidarity across interlinked concerns. Fourth, the report details the need to reclaim feminist multilateral and human rights spaces through promoting the voices and knowledge of women and other marginalized groups from the Global South in accessing international dialogues, while recognizing the racist and colonial histories of many such spaces. Fifth, the report shows it is necessary to mobilize adequate and sustainable financial resources for gender equality through reform of the global financial architecture, the development of feminist fiscal policies that help create more equitable and just economic systems and ensuring sustainable funding sources for diverse women's movements.

While there have been important areas of progress over the past 30 years, there remain myriad gaps in the realization of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action’s visionary blueprint. This report provides a concise and compelling stocktake by 23 visionary thinkers to energize collective efforts to build a more just and equitable world.

1. Introduction

This report has been compiled by the expert group that was (virtually) convened by UN-Women on 13–15 August 2024, ahead of the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The diverse group was comprised of feminist activists, youth advocates, academics and women’s human rights defenders, some of them delegates in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, who aimed to assess current progress on gender equality, analyse emerging opportunities, threats and prospects for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) and elaborate recommendations for accelerated implementation of its vision.

In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Women’s NGO Forum were convened in Beijing, bringing together more than 30,000 representatives of governments, women’s movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Marking a pivotal moment, governments from across the world adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and committed to a comprehensive and visionary agenda for gender equality and the realization of women’s and girls’ human rights. Building on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the BPfA identified 12 critical areas of concern and called for systemic changes across social, economic, political and environmental domains. Systemic change implied transforming the gendered power relations embedded in existing systems, rather than simply adding women into broken systems that perpetuate the status quo. Such transformations require institutions that are democratic, responsive, transparent and accountable to ensure women and girls can enjoy the full range of their human rights.

The EGM focused on three cross-cutting issues that are central to achieving gender equality:

- i. **Accountability:** Exploring whether existing institutional mechanisms have delivered on the promises of mainstreaming gender equality in laws and policies and how the current global context has impacted the fulfilment of those commitments.
- ii. **Recommitment:** Future-proofing the BPfA by protecting the gains, creating new opportunities and tackling risks as part of a forward-looking agenda for gender equality and women’s rights.
- iii. **Resources:** Discussing gaps in resource availability and developing methods to ensure adequate financing and political support to implement the BPfA and accelerate progress on gender equality as the engine of the 2030 Agenda.

2. The challenging global context

Efforts to advance gender equality are set against a deteriorating global landscape and cascading crises that are having a disproportionate negative impact on women, girls, youth and gender-diverse people, especially those living in poverty and on the margins.

In recent years, repeated shocks have rocked the world, from the COVID-19 pandemic to food, fuel and financial crises. Violent conflict is a deadly reality for billions of people, from Palestine to Ukraine and Sudan to Yemen. In 2023, more than 170 armed conflicts were recorded, and approximately 612 million women and girls lived within 50 kilometres of these conflicts, an increase of 54 per cent compared to 2010.¹ These conflicts exact a devastating toll on the lives of women, girls and gender diverse people, including death, injury, sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement and violations of the right to food, health, education and water.

Since 7 October 2023, and up until the end of April 2024, the Israeli military has killed 34,535 Palestinians and injured 77,704, with a further 10,000 missing, presumed buried under rubble. The majority killed and injured were estimated to be civilians, with nearly 70 per cent of them children and women.² The entire vital infrastructure and sectors of the Gaza Strip are entirely or partially destroyed, including health, water and sewage, electricity, roads, schools, universities and kindergartens. As a result of Israeli military aggression, the sixth episode since 2008, nine out of ten Gazans have been displaced at least once, leaving close to 2 million Palestinians without food, water, electricity, health services or any safe place to go.³ In January 2024, the International Court of Justice issued a landmark ruling in which it found it plausible that Israel's acts in Gaza could amount to genocide and issued six provisional measures, ordering Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent genocidal acts, including preventing and punishing incitement to genocide, ensuring aid and services reach Palestinians under siege in Gaza and preserving evidence of crimes committed there.⁴ In November 2024, the International Criminal Court issued three arrest warrants

¹ Data on the number of women and girls living within 50 kilometres of armed conflict are calculated by Peace Research institute Oslo, based on Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset, Global version 24.1. and CIESIN (2018) Gridded Population of the World v.4.11. Data on armed conflict come from Uppsala Conflict Data Program Dataset Download Center, accessed June 2024.

² United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2024. "Update Report: Six-Month Update Report on the Human Rights Situation in Gaza: 1 November 2023 to 30 April 2024." Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/opt/20241106-Gaza-Update-Report-OPT.pdf>.

³ United Nations Palestine. 2024. "9 out of 10 Palestinians Have Been Displaced at Least Once." 4 July. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://palestine.un.org/en/273224-9-out-10-people-gaza-have-been-displaced-least-once>; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2024. "Reported Impact Shot: Gaza Strip (2 October 2024)." Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-2-october-2024>.

⁴ See: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2024. "Gaza: ICJ Offers Hope for Protection of Civilians Enduring Apocalyptic Conditions, Say UN Experts." 31 January. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/gaza-icj-ruling-offers-hope-protection-civilians-enduring-apocalyptic>; and International Court of Justice. 2024. "Summary of the Order of 26 January 2024." Accessed 16

against senior Israeli leaders and a Hamas official, accusing them of war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁵

Meanwhile, the 19-month-long conflict in Sudan has created the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, with an estimated 24.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 8 million internally displaced persons and millions at risk of starvation.⁶ There are no reliable estimates of the numbers of casualties or victims of pervasive sexual violence perpetrated by the warring parties, the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Response Forces, in a conflict that has gone largely under the radar of public attention. In June 2014, the Security Council signatories of the Shared Commitments on Women, Peace and Security drew attention to the atrocities being committed against women and girls and called for an immediate ceasefire, for support, services and justice for survivors of gender-based violence and for women to be fully, equally and safely included in political processes and humanitarian responses.⁷

Since 2021, Afghanistan has spiralled into an authoritarian regime under the rule of the Taliban that has institutionalized misogyny and is described by experts, including Afghan women, as “gender apartheid”.⁸ The Taliban’s latest morality law, passed in August 2024, requires women and girls to cover their entire bodies and faces everywhere outside their homes. It forbids them from speaking in public, using public transportation alone or even looking at men to whom they are not related by blood or marriage. This comes on top of edicts issued over the past three years segregating women and men in daily life, prohibiting women from using gyms, parks or public baths and more.⁹ To dismantle the Taliban’s institutionalized system of gender oppression and to hold those responsible to account, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human

December 2024. <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454#:~:text=According%20to%20Judge%20ad%20hoc,and%20not%20the%20Genocide%20Convention.&text=that%20the%20Court%20did%20not,plausible%20intent%20to%20commit%20genocide.>

⁵ International Criminal Court. 2024. “Statement of ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC on the Issuance of Arrest Warrants in the Situation in the State of Palestine.” 12 November. Accessed 16 December 2024. [https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-issuance-arrest-warrants-situation-state-palestine.](https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-issuance-arrest-warrants-situation-state-palestine)

⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2024. “Sudan: Sectoral Cash Snapshot, October 2024.” Accessed 16 December 2024. [https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan.](https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan)

⁷ Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations. 2024. “Joint Press Statement on Behalf of the Signatories to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Shared Commitments to the United Nations Security Council Briefing on Sudan.” SC/WPS-SCH/PS6/ROK. 18 June. Accessed 16 December 2024. [https://www.un.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/shino061824.html.](https://www.un.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/shino061824.html)

⁸ Goetz, A.M. 2023. “Could the Taliban Join the UN? They’ll Need to End Their ‘Gender Apartheid’ System.” PassBlue, 25 November. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.passblue.com/2023/11/25/could-the-taliban-join-the-un-theyll-need-to-end-their-gender-apartheid>; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2024. “Afghanistan: ‘All Tools’ Approach Needed to End Systematic Gender Oppression, Says UN Expert.” 18 June. Accessed 16 December 2024. [https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/afghanistan-all-tools-approach-needed-end-systematic-gender-oppression-says.](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/afghanistan-all-tools-approach-needed-end-systematic-gender-oppression-says)

⁹ Bahous, S. 2024. “We Must Step Forward: The Situation Is Not Hopeless and We Are Not Helpless.” Speech by the UN-Women Executive Director to the UN Security Council Meeting on Afghanistan, 18 September. Accessed 16 December 2024. [https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2024/09/speech-we-must-step-forward-the-situation-is-not-hopeless-and-we-are-not-helpless.](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2024/09/speech-we-must-step-forward-the-situation-is-not-hopeless-and-we-are-not-helpless)

rights in Afghanistan has called for the use of international accountability mechanisms, as well as pursuing cases at the national level under the principle of universal jurisdiction; and, in stark contrast to the Doha meetings in 2024, for Afghan civil society, including women human rights defenders, to be meaningfully included in all political processes related to the future of the country.¹⁰

The experts highlighted that no equality and human rights agenda can be fulfilled unless there are active measures to end these conflicts and numerous others, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, among others. As well as States experiencing generalized humanitarian crises, pockets of conflict exist in many other countries perceived as being at relative peace and upholding democratic practices.

In addition to conflict, destabilizing long-term economic trends, poor land governance and unsustainable extraction of natural resources exacerbate inequalities within and between countries, with prevailing development models failing to create decent jobs and livelihoods, adequate housing or food security for the majority of people. An ongoing cycle of economic crises, mounting debt and austerity prevents much-needed investment in policies and programmes to advance gender equality and the rights of all women, girls and gender-diverse people.¹¹ While technological advancements are generating new opportunities, they are also creating new challenges and exacerbating existing inequalities, including by perpetuating and worsening gender-based violence, now perpetrated in digital spaces.

The economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw unrelenting profit-seeking in the health sector, and subsequent cost-of-living crises have worsened longer-term trends concentrating wealth, well-being and opportunities in the hands of a few. Those in power have profited from the political marginality and forced isolation and displacement of migrant and poor communities. These communities are also targeted by technology-assisted hyper-surveillance by the state in the name of security. Meanwhile, a long-term erosion of state capacity as a result of neo-liberal market-centred economic policies has reduced public sector budgets, privatized and deregulated essential public services and deepened income inequality and social exclusion. This has reduced trust in mainstream politicians and policy experts, fractured solidarity among social groups and enabled the rise of far-right political outsiders.¹²

¹⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2024. "Afghanistan", op. cit.; Fetrat, S. 2024. "UN Meeting Blocks Afghan Women from Agenda, Participation." Human Rights Watch, 24 June. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/24/un-meeting-blocks-afghan-women-agenda-participation>.

¹¹ UN-Women. 2024. *The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Harnessing Social Protection for Gender Equality, Resilience and Transformation*. New York: UN-Women.

¹² UN-Women. Forthcoming. "Defending Rights in Hostile Times: Understanding Backlash to Advance Gender Equality." Policy Brief, No. 27. New York: UN-Women.

As global temperatures break records, climate-related disasters and environmental crises continue to escalate, taking a disproportionate toll on the poorest countries and affecting the most marginalized women and girls who, even though they have contributed least to the problems, now bear the burden of sustaining families and communities through them. Since 1900, global sea-levels have risen faster than in any preceding century in the last 3,000 years, endangering coastal farmlands and water reserves and posing an existential threat to low-lying small islands.¹³ Skyrocketing levels of pollution, including plastic, are reducing ecosystems' ability to adapt to climate change, and biodiversity loss is accelerating. This ecological meltdown is driven by a globalized economic system in which the drivers of climate change, environmental degradation and gender and social inequality are interconnected. The system depends on the extraction of natural resources and the exploitation of cheap labour, particularly from poor women and colonized and racialized groups. Over centuries, this colonial, extractivist, patriarchal and racist system has turned the natural environment, particularly in the Global South, into a tap for the extraction of resources and a sink for disposing of waste.¹⁴ The growth of new technologies is fuelling the climate crisis, since largely unregulated technology manufacturing processes emit millions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

This context of crises and conflict, the erosion of democratic processes and principles, as well as the growing political success of autocratically inclined and explicitly misogynist social forces, are making progress on gender equality and the realization of human rights increasingly difficult. Historically disadvantaged groups that experience intersectional forms of discrimination, including women of colour, the LGBTIQ+ community and Indigenous women, are particularly hard hit.

Acknowledging these overwhelming challenges, the expert group discussions encompassed five broad areas of progress, concern and recommitment:

- i. Advancing the normative framework on gender equality
- ii. Ensuring accountability of Member States in the context of a global backlash against gender equality
- iii. Strengthening intersectional and intergenerational women's movements
- iv. Reclaiming feminist multilateral and human rights spaces
- v. Mobilizing adequate and sustainable financial resources to advance gender equality.

The following section discusses in further detail these five themes and their impact on women, girls and youth, in all their diversity, and other marginalized communities and makes

¹³ UN-Women. 2023. "Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action". Conceptual framework prepared for *Progress of the World's Women* series. New York: UN-Women.

¹⁴ Ibid.

recommendations for Member States, the United Nations system, civil society and the private sector to address them.

3. Progress, gaps and recommendations

3.1 Advancing the normative framework on gender equality

The normative framework on gender equality, encompassing national laws and policies as well as regional and global human rights norms and frameworks, has evolved significantly since the Beijing Conference. Driven by strong, autonomous women's movements and reporting before the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), among other human rights commitments, notable progress has been achieved to repeal discriminatory laws and to legislate against gender-based violence. However, significant gaps remain that need to be urgently addressed. For example, a number of States still do not criminalize rape within marriage and fail to protect women's reproductive rights in policies and laws. In the economic sphere, most countries fail to recognize care work as work or to take steps through laws and policies to address women's concentration in informal employment and create decent work.

A key area where progress has stalled for many decades is on discriminatory family laws, which encompass laws on marriage and unions, divorce and dissolution, financial rights and child custody and guardianship. These laws are often influenced by conservative interpretations of religion, culture and tradition, and they continue to serve as the bedrock of patriarchy, significantly disadvantaging women in the public and private spheres. Article 16 of CEDAW requires States Parties to ensure that women have equal rights to men in all matters relating to marriage and family relations.¹⁵ But States Parties frequently enter reservations to this article, which result in inequalities between women and men and between women of different ethnic groups or religious faiths. While championing gender equality, Member States have displayed little impetus to reform family law, failing to acknowledge that the two are intrinsically linked. In the most extreme cases, notably Afghanistan, highly conservative interpretations of religion are used to justify the curtailment of women's and girls' rights to education and freedom of speech and movement. Such discriminatory practices violate women's human rights and perpetuate gender inequality, marginalizing women within their communities and societies at large.

In addition to these longstanding normative and legal gaps, several other challenges with far-reaching implications for the achievement of gender equality have emerged since 1995, requiring new normative standards at global, regional and national levels. Digital technology and the threats presented by the climate crisis are two such areas.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly. 1979. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. 18 December. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

Digital technology has evolved in ways that could not have been predicted at the Beijing Conference. Critical Area ‘J’ of the BPfA is on the media, including recommendations to States and media corporations to exercise caution in their depictions of women in the media and use their influence to promote equality. Through social media, digital technology has exponentially increased the challenges of and opportunities for reinforcing or undermining damaging stereotypes of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people. More broadly, it has changed the way that people learn, earn their livelihoods, access public services, communicate with each other and much more. Access to technology and the experiences of vulnerable groups on digital platforms are interlinked with their access and exercise of other human rights. In the absence of deliberate and targeted policies to address the digital gender divide, the rise of digital technologies has already exacerbated and will continue to worsen gender inequalities.

New norms and regulatory and legal frameworks are also needed to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people are targeted for sexual harassment and privacy violations online. Cyberbullying, harassment, threats of rape and other acts of violence are commonplace in the digital space, especially for women journalists, civil society activists and public figures. Social media platform companies have failed to tackle online harassment due to economic incentives, lack of regulation and inconsistent enforcement of policies, allowing mis- and disinformation to flourish and racist, sexist and homophobic rhetoric to spread largely unchecked.¹⁶ The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has expanded avenues for sexual abuse with the use of ‘deepfakes’ and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. While gender-based violence goes unchecked, some Member States have been quick to introduce legislation that regulates online spaces in ways that limit freedom of expression and dissent, increase surveillance and restrict access to information, often colluding with social media companies to spread propaganda instead.

A visionary consideration for its time, the BPfA was one of the first documents to reference the gendered impact of climate change and attribute it to militarization, poverty and industrialization. It was also the first global policy framework to mainstream gender as a key strategy for combating climate change. Critical Area K of the BPfA, “Women and the Environment”, called for integrating women, including Indigenous women, into decision-making processes on sustainable resource management and environmental policymaking.

The Paris Agreement (2015) represented a landmark advance in the global normative framework, but the first global stocktake in 2023 revealed that the world is significantly off-track on the key commitment to keep global heating below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. New negotiation tracks at the annual Conferences of the Parties (COP) on “just transition” and loss and damage potentially open avenues for discussions on justice and equality, including gender

¹⁶ Amnesty International. 2018. “Crowdsourced Twitter Study Reveals Shocking Scale of Online Abuse against Women.” 18 December. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/12/crowdsourced-twitter-study-reveals-shocking-scale-of-online-abuse-against-women>.

equality. But to date, despite the disproportionate harm caused by the climate and biodiversity crises to women and girls, especially those from Indigenous groups and those living in rural areas and/or living in poverty, gender considerations in climate policy agendas at global, regional and national levels have been largely symbolic and rhetorical. While there has been some progress in improving women's participation in climate discussions, women, girls, LGBTIQ+ people and youth, in all their diversity, continue to be under-represented in leadership and decision-making roles. Multilateral climate funds, most recently the Loss and Damage Fund administered by the World Bank, often include inadequate or absent safeguards and standards to ensure gender responsiveness. Gender-responsive laws and policies to address the climate and biodiversity crises are now a major gap in the normative framework that needs to be addressed.

Recommendations

- i. The 30th anniversary of the Beijing Conference presents an opportunity to revisit and expand the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to accommodate new and emerging challenges, with clearer links to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- ii. Member States must immediately amend discriminatory family laws in line with the provisions of CEDAW. United Nations Member States and international organizations should reaffirm their commitments to upholding women's and girls' human rights within families, irrespective of their form and composition.
- iii. Legal and policy frameworks are needed to maximize the opportunities presented by digital technologies and to minimize the threats they pose to gender equality. These norms, at global, regional and national level, should prioritize the protection of women and marginalized groups from online harassment, violence, surveillance and data misuse, among other threats. They must include stringent regulations for the ethical development and deployment of AI, with clear accountability mechanisms to prevent and address biases. These laws and regulations must also have a robust implementation plan, with training and capacity building of responsible authorities to prevent discrimination in their application.
- iv. To achieve effective and equitable climate action, it is essential to mainstream gender considerations in climate accords, policies and norms. Climate policies need to address intersecting inequalities. Civil society and under-represented communities, including women in all their diversities, need to be included in decision-making processes and all aspects of climate leadership.
- v. In view of the critical role that women play in peacebuilding, and the fact that peace agreements are more durable where women are represented in peace negotiations, the existing legal framework needs to be expanded to include provisions for women's equal, full and meaningful participation in formal peace processes.

3.2 Ensuring accountability of Member States in the context of global backlash

Accountability is at the heart of the BPfA. Chapter V establishes the need for immediate action and accountability mechanisms at the national, subregional/regional and international levels.

Since 1995, there has been a proliferation of institutions charged with ensuring accountability, including specialized gender machineries at national level and the CEDAW Optional Protocol (which entered into force in 2000).

Despite this progress on institutional mechanisms, implementation of norms, laws and policies is often lacking, pointing to gaps in accountability. For example, impressive progress has been made on the establishment of national, regional and international standards to ensure gender equality in access, control and ownership of land and natural resources. Unfortunately, the gap between these frameworks and their implementation, coupled with negative social norms and societal practices, remains a major challenge. At the international level, the present United Nations mechanisms built to uphold justice are inadequately resourced to be able to fulfil their mandate and mission effectively, particularly to prevent violence against women during conflict.

The global context for progress and accountability on gender equality has significantly worsened. The influence of formal accountability mechanisms, such as the BPfA, CEDAW and the SDGs, has weakened, resulting in impunity for Member States that violate rights. Human rights mechanisms are facing increased pressure due to humanitarian crises, non-compliance by Member States and limited resources. At the time that the BPfA was adopted, the global trend was towards democratization and globalization. Three decades later, multiple genocides are unfolding across the world, including in countries at relative peace. These affect entire populations but have particularly severe and long-term impacts on gendered bodies, rendering the idea of gender justice futile in such contexts. Conscious work must be undertaken to completely dismantle ongoing and new forms of colonialism, which impact poor populations, particularly in the Global South.

Recent years have also seen a rise in far-right politics, intertwined with intense and often violent backlash on the rights of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people. Far-right leaders have manufactured and encouraged an “othering” narrative that blames LGBTIQ+ people, feminists, and migrants for state failure to ensure sustainable development for all. They vocally seek to hollow out public service provisions and reinstate gender, social and racial hierarchies. These voices have gained power within the wider context of democratic erosion, and anti-gender equality organizations and movements have become increasingly influential in recent years.

As democratic institutions and norms including freedom of the press, of speech and of assembly are weakened, and civic space is closed down, the avenues that feminists have relied upon to hold duty bearers to account have also narrowed. Global systems of accountability have also been restricted as far-right governments have decried the multilateral human rights system and withdrawn from international treaties and commitments. Together, these developments amount to a de-institutionalization of gender equality, whereby national mechanisms for the promotion of women’s rights have been shut down or repurposed to advance conservative interpretations of family and gender roles, and a re-privatization of gender relations, seen through the weakening

of protections against domestic violence, the defunding of women's shelters and the criminalizing of aspects of reproductive health care.¹⁷

Lack of accountability by Member States in the context of global backlash is especially evident in relation to gender-based violence. While there has been significant progress on legal reform to prohibit this – including intimate partner violence, child, early and forced marriage and female genital cutting – significant gaps remain in implementation, notably in investments in justice systems and services to respond to and prevent violence. Not only have States failed in their due diligence responsibilities, in many cases governments are themselves complicit in abuses. Women human rights defenders put their lives on the line to demand equality and justice, to protect land and ecosystems and to expose corporate and state abuses; too often, they sacrifice their privacy, livelihoods, health or even their lives to advance this critical work.

The growth of corporate power is also undermining accountability for gender equality, which is illustrated through the issue of land. Large-scale acquisition of land, often by private companies, is displacing local communities and Indigenous peoples, sometimes in the name of environmental sustainability, resulting in loss of livelihoods and environmental degradation. Women are especially vulnerable to land grabbing because their land rights are often informal or insecure. Combating land grabbing requires a comprehensive approach involving international and national frameworks, enforceable regulation of corporations and active civil society engagement. However, women continue to be isolated from decision-making processes and there is little transparency or accountability in land-related transactions.

Recommendations

- i. Member States and international institutions must acknowledge the erosion of accountability systems and recommit to upholding normative commitments to human rights frameworks without reservation.
- ii. Treaty bodies, particularly the CEDAW Committee, should be empowered to ensure oversight of the implementation of the BPfA by State Parties as part of the reviews of their reporting obligations.
- iii. At global level, investments are needed in human rights and intergovernmental bodies that are central to ensuring accountability, such as the CEDAW Committee, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council, including to guarantee the meaningful integration of civil society actors beyond tokenistic representation.
- iv. In recognition of States' responsibility for violations of human rights by private or non-state actors, much stronger accountability measures are needed for human rights abuses, including gender-based violence, perpetrated or facilitated by corporate actors.

¹⁷ Goetz, A.M. 2019. "The Politics of Preserving Gender Inequality: De-institutionalisation and Re-privatisation." *Oxford Development Studies* 47(4), pp. 1–16.

- v. International organizations should recognize and monitor the scale and severity of backlash against gender equality. They should commit to strengthening civil society organizations, particularly women's rights, feminist and LGBTIQ+ organizations, which are most effective in countering it.
- vi. In recognition of the risks women human rights defenders take to ensure accountability, specific measures are required to protect them and their families, including asylum policies, special visas, collective protection programmes and relocation opportunities.
- vii. Full implementation of existing laws and policies intended to promote gender equality in land governance, protect environmental and land defenders and ensure transparency on all land-based investments is required.
- viii. Data are invaluable for measuring progress and holding governments accountable. Quantitative and qualitative data and research can help legitimize the concerns raised by civil society actors and spur action by duty-bearers. Governments should invest in robust data collection systems that meet international standards for privacy and data protection, while also being accessible to a broad range of data users.

3.3 Strengthening intersectional and intergenerational women's movements

The radical vision of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was driven by the thousands of women's rights and feminist activists who participated in the conference. Even in the face of fierce backlash and shrinking civic spaces, such movements have continued to expose inequalities, demand accountability and create momentum for change. From Pacific feminists who identify the climate crisis as the most urgent priority, to Muslim feminists who engage with scholars to produce new rights-based knowledge to advocate for change, to grassroots women mobilizing their communities to end conflict and demand seats at peace tables, diverse women's movements have found ingenious ways to amplify their issues and bring about change.

Feminism has never been more mainstream and has never mobilized as many young people as it does today. The challenges presented by the current global context has made organizing and building solidarity more urgent, but also more complicated. Breathing life into commitments on intersectional and intergenerational organizing requires massive human and financial resources, which are in short supply. The severe backlash against gains made by feminist movements over generations has created an environment of great risks and challenges, particularly for young feminist movements. International systems have been exclusive, extractive and sometimes exclusionary of specific constituencies. Young feminist movements seek to reimagine, reframe and rebuild systems that visibilize, value and effectively deliver on claims for human rights and justice. The recognition and acceptance of their leadership and the valuing of their experiences is critical in this endeavour.

Intersectional feminism is a commitment to broad social, economic and environmental justice and to the multiple identities that women and gender diverse people have. Feminist movement strengthening therefore requires solidarity that crosses borders and spans multiple concerns, all of

which are interlinked. For example, research confirms that gender-based violence is worsening in the context of the climate crisis, while land grabbing, a form of gender-based violence, is exacerbating that crisis. There needs to be a focus on generating the scientific and participatory research-based evidence needed to make the case as well as empathy and solidarity to join forces with other feminists and social justice actors to amplify collective voices and strengthen the movement for change.

History shows that collectively strengthening feminist movements is critical to building accountability, defending gains and breaking new ground. The overlap of gender inequality with other structural and environmental challenges necessitates the creation of spaces for inclusive, intersectional and intergenerational dialogue among women human rights defenders and activists to share ideas, strategies and best practices. Most importantly, an ideological expansion of the limiting belief that empowering one group diminishes others is more necessary now than ever. The feminist movement has always been grounded in collective action; shared power and solidarity will amplify collective strength and create more opportunities for all.

Recommendations

- i. Strengthen the feminist movement at all levels. Civil society, women's rights defenders and activists need to recommit to building solidarity and capacity across issues, within and between countries and in global spaces.
- ii. Recognize the impact of United Nations capture and the erosion of the gains made in human rights norm building as critical challenges for feminist women's movements, particularly young feminist movements.
- iii. Commit to deepening the intergenerational dimensions of the feminist movement. The leadership of young feminists is critical to reimagine, reform and recast the human rights systems to create an effective system that will deliver in the current context, while older generations have a depth of experience to contribute gained over many decades of advocacy.
- iv. Ensure resources and spaces for convening, which is essential for movement building and must be enabled by funders at national, regional and global levels.
- v. Prioritize movement building that spans different issues to build solidarity and strength. For example, the movement of women living on and from the land can be strengthened to ensure solidarity with the larger feminist movement to enhance their advocacy in the face of environmental/land degradation and competing land-based interests.

3.4 Reclaiming feminist multilateral and human rights spaces

Deglobalization and increasing multipolarity have increased geopolitical tensions and fragmentation in global governance. As new alliances and power blocs have emerged, consensus on gender equality has become more fragmented and contentious. Global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic stagnation, the climate crisis and armed conflict, have shifted

focus to these immediate threats and away from gender equality with little consideration for their intersection.

The economic crisis brought on by the pandemic has diverted funding from multilateral spaces such as the United Nations, thus limiting their capacity. Nationalist and populist politics have delegitimized and moved attention away from international cooperation, prioritizing national sovereignty and so-called traditional values, at odds with transnational feminist movements that promote equality and progress. Backlash at national levels is increasingly playing out in global fora, with issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and LGBTIQ+ rights heavily contested by well-organized opposition forces. The result has been a growing normative gridlock, with progressive governments and movements heavily involved in defending previous advances, to the detriment of further advances.

Access to multilateral spaces has always been restricted, and grassroots movements and organizations, particularly organizations of women and other marginalized groups from the Global South, have faced barriers to their participation in international dialogues in the form of visa restrictions, racial profiling at the borders, lack of financial resources and limited access to information. Decolonial and feminist multilateral spaces would mean recognizing the racist and colonial histories of those countries that host the headquarters of most international organizations.

The space for feminist organizing and dialogue in multilateral spaces has therefore shrunk, making meaningful engagement immensely challenging. In turn, this has led to a de-prioritization of women's human rights, as evidenced by the ongoing challenges to agreed language and the need to advocate for gender to be included strongly in the Pact for the Future.

The liquidity crisis facing the United Nations has also had adverse effects on accountability processes related to gender equality. Budget constraints have led to reduced staffing, limited programme implementation and compromised monitoring and evaluation capabilities. This crisis undermines the effectiveness of United Nations agencies in holding States and other actors accountable for their commitments to gender equality.

Recommendations

- i. The CEDAW Committee and UN-Women have long-standing histories of facilitating feminist multilateral spaces. These spaces need to be expanded to meaningfully engage feminist civil society, starting with the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.
- ii. The United Nations needs to be claimed as a feminist space, free from corporate capture under the guise of 'multistakeholder partnerships'.
- iii. The time for the selection of the United Nation's first woman Secretary-General is long overdue. It is imperative that the tenth Secretary-General is a feminist woman with deep roots in movements for social justice and human rights.

- iv. Multilateral organizations and forums such as the Human Rights Council, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), World Health Organization, International Labour Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) must secure space for civil society organizations and gender considerations in their operations and policies.
- v. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), where Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment will be under review in 2025, presents an opportune moment to commit to accelerating efforts on all the SDGs to reinvigorate the 2030 Agenda and restore momentum on the BPfA.

3.5 Mobilizing adequate and sustainable financial resources to advance gender equality.

The BPfA emphasizes the importance of allocating adequate financial resources to advance gender equality. It calls on governments, international organizations and the private sector to increase funding for initiatives that promote women's rights, reduce gender disparities and support women's economic independence. The BPfA also urges the integration of gender perspectives into budgeting processes to ensure that financial policies and allocations effectively address the needs of women and girls, a recommendation that kickstarted global work on gender-responsive budgeting.

However, years of global economic instability and recession have severely constrained the ability of Member States, especially those in the Global South, to invest in gender equality and women's rights. Tax systems have shifted in ways that have disproportionately benefited large corporations and wealthy individuals. Furthermore, tax evasion and avoidance rob countries of the resources they need. In 2023, multinational corporations shifted an estimated \$1.15 trillion worth of profit into tax havens, cutting direct tax revenue by \$311 billion a year. An additional \$169 billion was lost through wealthy individuals using tax havens.¹⁸

As countries look elsewhere for finance, unfavourable public-private partnerships have proliferated and levels of sovereign debt have skyrocketed. In 2022, global public debt reached a record \$97 trillion.¹⁹ Today, 55 per cent of least developed and other low-income countries are either in debt distress or have a high risk of it.²⁰ Interest payments on debts crowd out spending on development priorities, including essential social protection and public services. Currently, 3.3 billion people live in 48 countries where spending on interest is greater than investment in

¹⁸ Tax Justice Network. 2023. "State of Tax Justice 2023." Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://taxjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/SOTJ/SOTJ23/English/State%20of%20Tax%20Justice%202023%20-%20Tax%20Justice%20Network%20-%20English.pdf>, pp. 10–11.

¹⁹ UN Trade and Development. 2023. "A World of Debt: A Growing Burden to Global Prosperity." Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt>.

²⁰ Ibid.

education and/or health.²¹ Low coverage and quality of public services is also contributing to high levels of household indebtedness, with severe impacts on women. With basic public services starved of resources, funding for essential programmes to ensure women and girls in all their diversities can harness the potential opportunities presented by global access to digital technology remains out of reach.

There is also a glaring lack of dedicated climate financing that specifically addresses gender dimensions. Funding mechanisms fail to incorporate gender perspectives or provide resources to support gender-responsive climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, often instrumentally including women rather than recognizing them as leaders of climate justice work. Most climate finance is provided as non-concessional loans, which exacerbate unsustainable debt, leading in turn to austerity policies that disproportionately affect women and girls.

Along with using tools such as gender-responsive budgeting, Member States should develop feminist fiscal policies to mobilize sustainable, progressive and flexible domestic and international resources for the realization of gender equality and human rights. Such a feminist fiscal framework would ensure that the wealthiest individuals and businesses make the largest contribution towards funding gender-responsive services and infrastructure, supporting the care economy and promoting women's economic empowerment.

For many poorer developing countries, global solidarity and cooperation is needed to finance gender-responsive social, economic and environmental policies. Unfortunately, efforts to mobilize resources for gender equality and human rights are hamstrung by the policies and practices of global financial institutions, such as the IMF, whose policy conditionalities often result in the imposition of harmful austerity measures, with disproportionate impacts on women and girls in all their diversities. Furthermore, levels of official development assistance (ODA) for gender equality are low and stagnant. In 2021–2022, only 4 per cent of bilateral allocable ODA provided by members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was dedicated to programmes with gender equality as the principal objective.²²

Women's and feminist movements, an engine of progressive social change in many countries, typically operate on shoestring budgets. Less than 1 per cent of ODA went to women's organizations in 2021–2022.²³ In addition to limited resources, the way in which funding is allocated has led to divisiveness and discouraged collaboration, with organizations in survival

²¹ Interagency Task Force on Financing for Development. 2024. *Financing for Sustainable Development Report* 2024. New York: United Nations.

²² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2024. "DAC Network on Gender Equality: Latest Data on Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment." DCD/DAC/GEN(2024)1. Accessed 16 December 2024.

[https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/GEN\(2024\)1/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/GEN(2024)1/en/pdf).

²³ Ibid.

mode and unable to prioritize their core mandates. Lack of resources means that these organizations are isolated and unable to participate in policy discussions, mobilize communities or implement gender equality initiatives. The scarcity of funding limits their reach and impact, making it difficult to sustain long-term advocacy and action for gender equality.

Women's and feminist funds play a critical role in providing flexible and core funding to grassroots organizations. Unlike traditional funding sources, these funds prioritize the needs of feminist movements, offering financial support that allows organizations to be adaptable and resilient. This approach empowers grassroots initiatives to address gender equality issues effectively and sustainably.

Recommendations

- i. Comprehensive reform of the global financial architecture is needed, including cancellation of unsustainable debt and the elimination of gender biases in public debt management. Sustainability of life must come before debt sustainability.
- ii. Member States should support the proposed United Nations global tax convention, currently being negotiated, to promote tax justice and ensure that wealth distribution mechanisms are fair and equitable. Current financial systems favour the wealthy, exacerbating inequalities that unfairly impact women, girls and marginalized communities.
- iii. Member States should develop feminist fiscal policies to ensure adequate resources for gender equality and human rights and as a basis for the creation of more equitable and just economic systems.
- iv. Gender equality should be explicitly included as a component of agreements between international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, and Member States. Incorporating gender equality into these agreements would ensure that lending and programmes are designed to limit harmful austerity measures and promote gender-equitable development outcomes.
- v. Member States should continue to strengthen and build on their work to implement gender-responsive budgeting across government spending.
- vi. Gender equality must be effectively mainstreamed into all climate funding, including measures to protect and redress gender inequality in control and ownership of land and natural resources.
- vii. Immediate steps must be taken to ensure that accountability mechanisms such as the CEDAW Committee have the resources to fulfil their obligations to holding the standards for gender equality.
- viii. Finance is needed for programmes that focus on digital literacy skills and economic inclusion of women and girls in all their diversities through access to technology.
- ix. It must be acknowledged that transformative change is a long-term process, and feminist organizations must have sustainable and flexible financial support to undertake their work in ways that affirm collaborations and alliance building, rather than competition and divisiveness.

- x. A deliberate redistribution of resources, including the creation of more and better-resourced women's and feminist funds, is necessary to adequately fund the critical work that women's movements do. Funding should be granted through processes in which feminist values are embedded and in consultation with feminist movements.

4. Conclusion

Thirty years after the Beijing Conference, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action continue to stand as a visionary blueprint for equality and justice. While there have been critical areas of progress, there remain myriad gaps in implementation. These have become more difficult to close in the context of multiple, overlapping crises, exacerbated by powerful backlash on gains made on gender equality and human rights.

There is a critical need to deepen accountability for progress, re-prioritize and recommit to gender equality and recognize that sustainable development cannot be achieved without gender equality. Now is the time to go beyond rhetorical or symbolic commitments to tangible, transformative action. The need to strengthen and fund intersectional and intergenerational feminist movements cannot be overstated, and the recommendations outlined in this report provide a blueprint to commence efforts to generate urgently needed changes.