

Beijing Betrayed
*Women Worldwide Report that Governments Have Failed
To Turn the Platform into Action*

Executive Summary

This report is the fifth in a series by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) assessing governments' progress in implementing the commitments they made to the world's women at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women that met in Beijing in 1995. It consists of reports from women in 150 countries representing every region of the world. Their realities often contrast sharply with the official reports of their governments.

Beijing Betrayed is a testimony to women as agents of change and gives us cause for celebration. Women everywhere have used the Platform for Action to push governments into taking action, crafting legislation and raising public awareness to promote women's human rights, peace and sustainable development.

But the title reflects powerful evidence that key government commitments to women have yet to be achieved. Here is the core of the critique: **Governments worldwide have adopted a piecemeal and incremental approach to implementation that cannot achieve the economic, social and political transformation underlying the promises and vision of Beijing.**

Challenges

A combination of several global trends has created an environment hostile to the advancement of women's rights:

- *Growing militarization* since September 2001 and an increase in regional ethnic and communal violence have increased the numbers of refugee and displaced people and undermined women's access to basic services and protections.
- *The dominance of neo-liberal economic frameworks and market-driven policies* have led to changes in trade and finance rules and to deregulation and privatization that have increased poverty and deepened inequalities between nations and within them, especially for women.
- *Rising fundamentalist movements* seek to roll back women's gains and to limit their freedoms and opportunities in all spheres of life, including reproductive health care.

In this climate, which constrains resources and narrows views about acceptable women's roles, few governments have mobilized the political will or high-level leadership to carry out the commitments made to women at Beijing. As a result, many women in all regions are actually worse off now than they were ten years ago.

Achievements

The Beijing Platform for Action laid out goals and action recommendations in various areas of concern. Results in all have been mixed.

- **Human rights:** The UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has now been ratified by 179 countries, up from 146 a decade ago. Governments are taking notice of the global trafficking of women and children into forced marriage, prostitution, bonded labor and domestic servitude.
 - **But** the United States is still not among the CEDAW ratifying countries. Some of those countries still maintain formal reservations to the agreement and retain discriminatory laws.
 - Right-wing forces everywhere invoke culture and religion to deny women's rights.
 - Punitive approaches to trafficking dominate, while few protect the human rights of the affected women or to address the root causes of trafficking.

- **Peace and security:** Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, emphasizes the importance of women's role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peace-building.. Many governments have adopted laws barring violence against women, and international law now recognizes rape and sexual coercion during conflicts as crimes against humanity.
 - **But** few measures address the root causes of violence or challenge cultural norms that see rape and abuse as private family concerns.
 - Public awareness of Resolution 1325 is minimal. Women are still mostly absent at decision-making levels in governments and businesses worldwide.
 - Governments have failed adequately to protect refugees and asylum-seekers.

- **Power and decision-making:** Where countries have adopted laws or programs to increase women's numbers in parliament, women's concerns have higher priority as a result.
 - **But** average representation has risen by just 4 percent over the decade: from 11.7 to 15.8 percent of elected officials.
 - West Asia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait still deny women the right to vote or hold office.

- **Poverty eradication:** Some governments have adopted laws against workplace gender discrimination and to engage men in family care.
 - **But** women are still the poorest of the poor, concentrated in agriculture and the informal economy in often hazardous work. Causes include low job growth; lack of access to resources, training, credit and services; and remaining legal barriers.
 - Women's labor is still under-valued and under-counted in national statistics, while trade and economic policies that govern their lives rarely consider their needs.
 - In most of the world, unpaid family and household care still rests on women.

- **Education:** The Beijing goal of universal enrollment in primary education for girls and boys is likely to be met in 2005, except in sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia.
 - **But** dropout and illiteracy rates remain higher for girls than boys; inequality persists at secondary and higher levels; and gender stereotyping remains in most textbooks.
- **Natural resources and environmental security:** Some governments have adopted laws to give women rights to own and inherit land, and enough women Ministers of the Environment have been named that they formed their own network in 2002.
 - **But** women remain absent from most environmental decision-making bodies.
 - Women still lack property rights in many countries, while trends like water privatization undermine their ability to manage resources and meet family needs.
- **Health:** Women worldwide are still struggling for the right to autonomy over their own bodies. Access to basic and reproductive health care continues to be problematic worldwide, especially for rural and low-income women. Women and girls are most at risk from HIV/AIDS, primarily because of sexual subordination and stigma attached to victims.

Conclusion

These reports, contributed by women in more than 150 countries, show concretely that the rhetoric of governments at Beijing has failed to play out in the reality of women's lives. Governments have displayed a lack of will in turning their commitments to women's rights into decisive action, instead adopting a piecemeal and incremental approach that cannot achieve the economic, social and political transformation underlying the promises of Beijing.

The international women's movement has had a stake in the United Nations beginning 30 years ago with the first World Conference on Women and the launch of the Decade for women. Now the United Nations is at a crossroads, undermined by the growing dominance of the international trade and finance institutions and weakened by a lack of resources and power imbalances among its diverse membership.

In the coming year, governments will be considering a series of major proposals for reform of the UN. Despite its weaknesses, women continue to challenge the UN, pushing for a stronger forum for women's mobilization and ability to influence global policy.