

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY – TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION

women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century

Five years after women from 189 different countries had gathered and set the agenda for women's development in the next millennium at the historic conference in Beijing, came a time for stock taking. Women 2000 – Beijing + Five, saw the same august body gather at the United Nations to assess just how many of those promises have been kept — implemented by signatory nations so that they devolve down as benefits to the common women. Here are some excerpts from speeches made at the twenty-third Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

UNIFEM does not belong to those of us who manage its day to day activities. We are merely your custodians. It belongs to all who are committed to bring women to the table whenever issues of equality, development and peace are discussed and negotiated. It belongs to everyone who believes that gender perspectives should not only be on the development agenda, but that women should have a voice in setting the development and peace agendas.

Women know that the quality of their lives is determined not only by their own actions, or by the behaviour of husbands, children, mothers-in-law, employers, but equally important, by the eco-

nomie, cultural and political values and institutions of the countries and by non-state players at the national and international levels.

We are here today because the stakes for women are high. Women want a world where inequalities based on gender, class, caste and ethnicity are absent from every country and from the relationships among countries. Women want a world where fulfillment of basic needs becomes a basic right and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Where women's unpaid work of nurturing, caring and weaving the fabric com-

munity will be valued and shared equally by men. Where each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity. Where progress for women is recognized as progress for all.

Noleen Heyzer
Executive Director, UNIFEM



I want to begin by thanking the Secretary General for his introduction and his commitment to women's rights as central to all our debates over war and peace, poverty and development, and every other challenge facing humanity. I also want to thank Noeleen Heyzer and all of UNIFEM for championing women's economic empowerment and equality, and especially for once again bringing us together to spotlight the power of microcredit to transform lives and families, economies and countries...

I count the Beijing Conference as one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. We came to Beijing from 189 different countries. Mothers and sisters, daughters and wives, doctors and lawyers, homemakers and policymakers, artists and activists. We wore different clothing,

Hilary Rodham Clinton Lawyer, Activist & First Lady, USA



practiced different religions and spoke different languages. But, with one strong voice, we proclaimed for all the world to hear that women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights. Although our shout was heard around the world, not everyone truly understood it. I learned that when I was on a

Voice of America radio call-in show not long after. A gentleman called and he asked me the following question: "What did you mean when you said at Beijing that 'women's rights were human rights'?" I asked the gentleman to close his eyes for a minute and think about all the rights that he, as a man, had: The right to go to school. To health care. To live without fear of violence at the hands of loved ones or strangers. To vote. To own one's own property. To get a job or credit. To speak and worship freely. To seek legal redress. The right to be fully human, to be able to develop one's own, God-given potential... When girls are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burnt to death because their...dowries are deemed too small—and when honour killings continue to be tolerated—our work is far from done...we have miles to go.

Gro Harlem Brundtland Director-General, WHO



In Beijing, I said that there isn't a single country or institution in the world where men and women enjoy equal opportunities. Has that changed? I am afraid not. There have been improvements, that is true. But so often, the positive developments in one area have been cancelled by set-backs in others.

The struggle for progress in fields of women's human rights, health and opportunities, now has a century-long history. Why is the world moving so slowly? Attitudes are the key. They are changing, as the lives of women and girls are brought to light.

In many countries, women own nothing, inherit nothing and earn nothing. Three out of four of the poorest billion people of the world are women. Discrimination combined with poverty prevents women from getting out of situations of abuse and exploitation. Poverty leads to ill health, an additional strain on already over-stretched households. When women are ill, gender based discrimination further limits their access to care and treatment.

Societies will only be able to prosper, and emerge from poverty, if their women enjoy better health.

Investing in health makes good economic sense. Investing in women makes even better economic sense. Why health? Because health is fundamental for life.

Improving women's health means speaking out against all forms of violence: Female genital mutilation, trafficking, domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse. I say with Madeleine Albright: These

practices are not cultural, they are criminal.

Improving women's health means making sure that women get the attention and care that they need. The agreements reached in ICPD+5 are essential to delivering these services. The experience of the last five years indicates that many governments do not see improvements in women's health as

a priority, despite the goals set in Cairo and Beijing.

In WHO we have analysed 121 country reports on activities in the Beijing Platform for Action. Less than half of the reports identified women's health as a national priority. Some countries did not report on women's health at all. All countries should do better than that.

India was the first country to adopt the Beijing Platform for Action without reservations and is committed to its goals. In India, the year 2001 is 'Women's Empowerment Year'. Five years down the road from Beijing, as we review progress and define our vision for the 21st century, we seek inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, who said, long before it was fashionable to do so: "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion, she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality..."

Literacy rates for women have increased faster than for men. In the crucial area of reproductive health, our Reproductive Child Health Programme adopts a non-prescriptive approach to family planning and encourages greater male participation. In geographical scope, our Integrated Child Development Services Programme is one of the largest outreach programmes in the world and, with over a million village-level workers, it is the largest women's workforce under any one

Murli Manohar Joshi HRD Minister Government of India



programme anywhere. The girl child is a special focus of our social concern. Organising women's collectives and self-help groups has helped in the economic empowerment of women. Micro-credit institutions in rural areas have proven to be particularly successful.

The strong partnership established with the women's movement and NGOs has galvanised social mobilisation and action in local communities. The judiciary and media have played important roles. All of this has brought about a perceptible improvement in the position of women in India...

While we, like others in the larger community of democracies, work at the national level to implement what we call accepted as common goals in the Beijing Platform, the international environment has not been as supportive as we had hoped it would be, and there have been developments that have thwarted national efforts. Globalisation has been a mixed blessing for women and women have been the most vulnerable to the social stresses of globalisation...

To stop all forms of violence against women must be a foremost priority for all of us... The feminisation of poverty and the marginalisation of women need urgent remedial attention.

Gender bias is still not uncommon in programmes to remove illiteracy and malnutrition. Maternal mortality rates are unacceptably higher in the developing countries. While the governments do their best to improve health services for women... they need greater support from their development partners in the international community.