

ANALYSIS WOMEN

# Thirty Years on, the Legacy of Beijing's Fourth World Conference on Women Endures

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Over 30,000 voices converged in Beijing in 1995 to make one resounding declaration once and for all – ‘women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights’.



Opening Ceremony of the 4th World Conference on Women. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

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The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, was not a mere conference, it was a revolution. One that declared, unequivocally, that women's rights are human rights.

Thirty years later, the echoes of that rallying cry still reverberate, demanding not only a reflection but renewed action to transform our collective future.

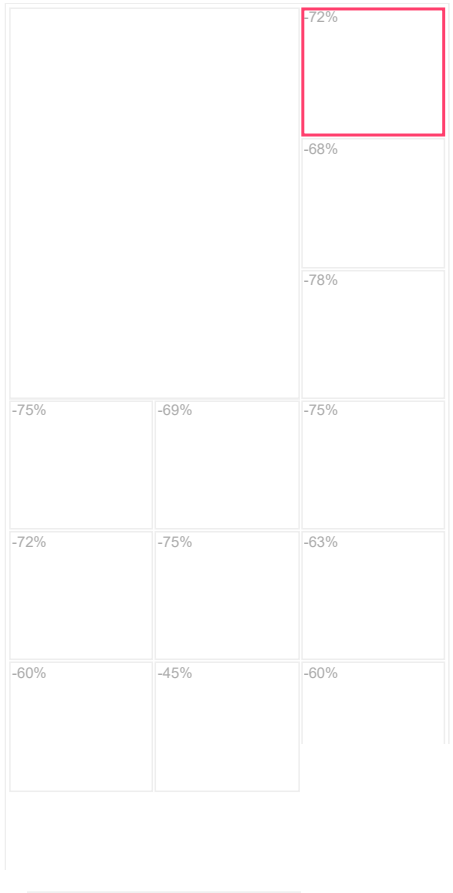
The year 2025 marks a significant milestone in the global struggle for gender justice as we commemorate 30 years of this historic event. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, born out of the fierce determination of women from across the world – represents an unapologetic commitment to dismantling the deep-rooted structures of patriarchy and oppression. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's '12 Critical Areas of Concern' have set the agenda for gender equality in ways that continue to shape policy, activism, and advocacy, till date.

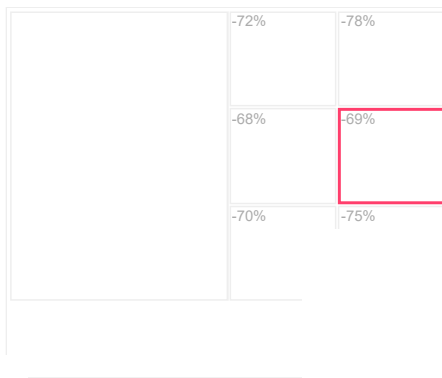


As we stand on the threshold of the Conference's 30th anniversary, we must acknowledge that the Beijing journey is not one of just milestones, but of a rich and complex history of struggles and tireless processes. For us, as leaders who have risen from the grassroots, this moment is a powerful reminder of how it all began.

**Paving the Road to Beijing**

The Fourth World Conference on Women marked the culmination of global developments in women's rights, beginning with the UN's International Women's Year (1975) and the Decade for Women (1976-1985).





Main official UN Conference. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

The adoption of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 set the global normative standard for gender equality, while the UN Women's Conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985) advanced the feminist agenda. The Nairobi Conference introduced 'Forward-Looking Strategies,' to dismantle structural barriers to gender equality. Conferences like the Vienna Conference (1993), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the Population Conference (1994) reinforced the push for a comprehensive gender equality framework, leading to Beijing in 1995.

Despite decades of global feminist mobilisation, international platforms had long been dominated by privileged feminist activists and scholars from India. They strategically positioned themselves as the sole voices of the movement. This elite capture silenced the realities of marginalised women, reinforcing structural exclusions within the global feminist discourse.

The 1995 Beijing Conference marked a turning point for grassroots feminists and community-led women's groups. In this historic moment, they stood up against the appropriation of the movement by the elites – reclaiming their rightful place in shaping the future of the feminist movement in India.

### **The Pre-Beijing Process in India**

The Beijing Conference in 1995 was shaped by a rigorous preparatory process at national, regional, and global levels. In India, the Royal Danish Embassy, in collaboration with the Government of India (GoI), led a donor initiative to support women's participation. To coordinate these efforts, the Inter-Agency Facilitating Committee for Beijing (IFCB) was formed in 1993, bringing together an unprecedented coalition of multilateral and bilateral organisations, NGOs, and private donors. The IFCB played a transformative role, breaking new ground by uniting donors with a singular focus on advancing women's human rights.

“IFCB advocated for a significant allocation of resources for the Beijing process, recognising it as a crucial step in advancing global gender equality. We also worked closely with GoI, ensuring that the voices of grassroots women were placed at the heart of all discussions leading up to Beijing”

– Karuna Anbarasan David, Former Women in Development Officer, Danida, Royal Danish Embassy.

Under Karuna Anbarasan David's leadership, the role of the Coordination Unit (CU) and a National NGO Advisory Committee emerged, through several consultations with NGOs and women's groups. The CU was formed in Delhi in December 1993, followed by its establishment in Bangalore in July 1994. The CU served as a facilitating body, a liaison and networking hub, that provided essential support – linking grassroots women's issues to broader national and global feminist platforms.

Suneeta Dhar was the coordinator of the CU, along with a team of subject matter specialists such as Aasha Ramesh (political participation), Madhu Mehra (women's rights), Sumita Ghosh (economy and livelihoods), Preeti Oza (health), C.P. Jayalakshmi (media/documentation/information) with support from Reena Kshetrapal for accounts and admin, along with other support-staff in Delhi. This committed team carried out path-breaking work that made a significant contribution to the Beijing process.



Opening Ceremony of the 4th World Conference on Women. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

The National NGO Advisory Committee was formed shortly after. Besides providing strategic direction and support to the CU, the members also participated in the planning of CU's consultations, acting as focal points across issues and regions. The advisors were Dr. Ilina Sen, Madhya Pradesh Mahila Manch; Jarjum Ete, APWWS, Arunachal Pradesh; Martha Gladstone, IWID, Tamil Nadu; Neelam Gorhe, Stree Adhar Kendra, Maharashtra; Dr. Pam Rajput, Centre for Women's Studies, Chandigarh; Pramila Swain, FARR, Odisha; Dr. Roshmi Goswami, TDMS, Assam; Dr. Ruth Manorama, Women's Voice, Karnataka; Sheba George, Sanchetna, Gujarat and Vasanth Kannabiran, Asmita, Andhra Pradesh.

Members of the Advisory Committee marked a departure from the elite-driven leadership, showcasing a new face of the feminist movement – one that was rooted in grassroots activism and inclusive of voices from marginalised communities. They each brought together the networking strength of the issues around which they were working.

Shobha Raghuram, Former Deputy Director, Hivos India Regional office and Ruth Manorama, set up another coordination unit (CU) in Bangalore to facilitate processes across South India. Seetha Anagol was the Coordinator and Cynthia Stephen was the Communication Officer, along with support staff. The Task Force Members for the CU in Bangalore included Mercy Kappen (Visthar, Karnataka) and the NGO Advisory Committee members from South India. Raghuram also set up a Donor Agency Network (DAN) of various donor organisations based in Bangalore to resource and support the process.



Suneeta Dhar from the Coordination Unit, and Ruth Manorama with the Women's Voice and the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) colleagues. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

### **Expansive Consultation Process in India**

The CU, in collaboration with its NGO Advisory Committee and the erstwhile UNIFEM South Asia Office (now UN Women), led numerous consultative processes across the country. This initiative fostered a decentralised, inclusive movement, resulting in the extraordinary mobilisation of grassroots women activists and women-led community organisations. Over two years, hundreds of consultations and workshops were held at the state and national level, addressing critical issues impacting women's lives. This engagement created a powerful platform for collective voices to shape the gender equality agenda in India.

The grassroots consultations were transformative – amplifying the voice, agency and leadership of women from marginalised communities, including women living with disabilities, women living with HIV/AIDS, single women. Also included, historically excluded geographies such as the North East, Kashmir, Kerala, among others. By addressing the Beijing Platform for Action's 12 critical areas of concern – ranging from Women and Poverty, Education, Health, and Violence Against Women, to Women in Power, Media, the Environment, the Girl Child – these

consultations empowered women and girls to articulate their experiences and solutions in their own terms.



Events organised by Women's Voice and partners at the NGO Forum at Huairou, China. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

This mobilisation strengthened alliances, built networks, and solidified the role of marginalised women as key drivers of the Beijing process. These local processes were also linked to processes at the South Asia, Asia-Pacific level and beyond, shaping the direction of women's rights and gender equality nationally, regionally and globally.

### **The Conference of Commitment**

This unprecedented grassroots mobilisation of women culminated in the development of a document. It addressed Beijing's 12 critical areas of concern, which were discussed at length with the Government of India to influence national policy conversations. This document was then submitted to the then prime minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao.

A significant milestone in the pre-Beijing journey was the "Conference of Commitment," organised by the NGO Advisory Committee members on August 9, 1995, at New Delhi. The Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) supported this initiative. Over 1,500 women representatives from across the country attended the Conference of Commitment at New Delhi, showcasing the collective voice and strength of India's grassroots women's movement.

In this gathering, Madhavrao J. Scindia, the then Minister for Human Resource Development under which the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) was, made a public declaration on behalf of the Union government. The government made key commitments in response to the collective demands of the women's groups and activists. These commitments were reiterated by the government at the Official Beijing Conference.

Dr. Sarala Gopalan and S.K. Guha of the then Women and Child Development Department offered committed support during the Beijing process. They were at the forefront of the government's gender mainstreaming efforts.

This Conference also catalysed the formation of key grassroots networks, such as the National Alliance of Women (NAWO), the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), the North East Network (NEN), among several others, strengthening the collective power of marginalised women's movement across the country. This growing solidarity helped build a strong foundation for the representation of diverse perspectives at the Beijing conference.

As women geared-up for the Beijing Conference in September 1995, they went through a transparent selection process led by the CU, the IFCB, and the NGO Advisory Committee. This process led to the selection of 300 women from across the country, representing marginalised groups and regions. This delegation was unprecedented. Never before and never after, has such a large, inclusive, and grassroots-led representation of Indian women been seen at a global conference.



Events organised by Women's Voice and partners at the NGO Forum at Huairou, China.  
Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

### **The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995**

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing from September 4-15, 1995, official inter-governmental meetings had 17,000 participants, including 6,000 government delegates, over 4,000 accredited NGO representatives and international civil servants, and 4,000 media representatives.

Meanwhile, the NGO Forum, an equally groundbreaking event, took place in Huairou, a town outside of Beijing. Around 30,000 grassroots activists, NGOs, and feminists from across the world were at the Forum. It became a powerful platform where marginalised women, especially from the Global South, asserted their rights. This forum shattered the dominance of white and elite feminists, creating a decentralised space for global feminist networking, solidarity, and advocacy.

The synergy and euphoria created by the Beijing conference – the scale, depth, and diversity remain unmatched. The conference culminated in the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, signed by 189 governments. It remains the most comprehensive global framework for advancing gender equality.



## The rise of grassroots and diverse feminist leadership through NAWO

Post the Beijing Conference, members of the NGO Advisory Committee came together to form the National Alliance of Women (NAWO) and registered NAWO as an organisation. NAWO became the first all-India women's formation to shift the influence of elite feminists and Delhi-centric organisations that had long monopolised key spaces within the Indian feminist movement.

For the first time, the leadership of a national feminist network was predominantly from marginalised communities, with a Dalit woman as the first president, Ruth Manorama and a tribal woman from the Northeast, Jarjum Ete as the first general secretary. Embracing an egalitarian approach, 90% of NAWO's leadership was made up of women from backward and marginalised communities. At the time, this was not only a symbolic shift but a radical one. It also marked the first time that women from outside Delhi, from regions and communities historically sidelined, were at the helm of leading a national feminist process.



Opening Ceremony of the 4th World Conference on Women. Photo: Women's Voice, Bangalore

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women, NAWO has anchored and led every post-Beijing process in India – from Beijing+5 to Beijing+20. NAWO collaborated with UN Women and the CSO Steering Committee for the Beijing+25 process. Through the decades, NAWO has prioritised the voices and struggles of those at the very bottom of all hierarchies – Dalit women, Adivasi women, Muslim women, working-class women, and other marginalised women.

“The Pre-Beijing and Post-Beijing processes have been remarkable in South Asia. NAWO stood out as one of the leading institutions in this movement. I was lucky to have been part of these processes as the former Regional Director of UNIFEM in South Asia. My hats off to NAWO's extraordinary leadership and dedication in this Beijing+30 Journey.”

– Chandni Joshi, regional director, erstwhile UNIFEM South Asia Office.

This is essentially the true power of the Beijing process – it was led by grassroots women. Unlike those who have dipped in and out of the movement when it serves their interests, NAWO's members have been consistently working at the grassroots for over 30 years. What NAWO does not have, of course, unlike elite feminist organisations, are well-placed allies in donor agencies and funds – social capital, shaped by caste and class privilege.

NAWO members have been earning meagre salaries at grassroots organisations, and more than often working on a voluntary basis. Without access to adequate resources, NAWO, like most grassroots organisations, faces an uphill struggle to sustain its critical work. However, the struggle continues, as we will keep fighting the good fight – until the day we can stand in a world where every woman and girl, regardless of caste, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, class or background, can live to her full human potential.

This is our story. The story of grassroots women whose fight for survival and dignity has been as political as it has been personal. The story of a feminist movement that, if it is to be transformative, must remain accountable to those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Now, more than ever, we must reckon with the unfinished revolution sparked in Beijing – and renew our commitment to dismantling the systems of power, privilege, and patriarchy that continue to oppress us.

### **Envisioning a Transformative Future**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has undeniably shaped the landscape of gender justice – fuelling legislative advances, policy reforms, and mobilising grassroots feminist activism. Yet, the gap between progressive laws and their implementation remains stark, while the world grapples with polycrises – violent conflicts, climate catastrophes, and deepening inequalities – that threaten to undo decades of feminist gains.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, this moment demands more than just reflection. The 1995 Beijing Conference was not an end in itself, but a quantum leap in the long journey towards gender equality. Now, we are at another crossroads, needing a monumental step forward with a strategy focused on long-term, systemic change.

While young feminists, particularly from the Global South, are stepping up to meet these challenges, by devising innovative ways to mobilise resources and forming solidarity networks – this is not their burden to carry alone. To drive transformative change, feminist movements must adopt intergenerational strategies, combining the hard-earned wisdom of older feminists with the innovation and dynamism of the younger feminists.

This is not just about intergenerational dialogues! It is about building reform coalitions capable of dismantling entrenched systems of oppression. The leadership of young feminists, especially those from historically marginalised communities, must be at the forefront – just as during the Beijing process, ensuring that the movement is not only inclusive but deeply intersectional.

It is also critical to recognise that we no longer have the privilege of working in silos. The challenges we face are deeply interconnected. To address these complex issues, we must build reform coalitions that bring together diverse voices and expertise. By working across sectors and movements, we can amplify our impact, share resources, and build stronger alliances capable of driving systemic change.

As we prepare for the Beijing+30 review, feminists across the globe, especially from the Global South, must lead with unyielding resolve, and demand the kind of action that matches the urgency of our time. While global initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals and the Pact for the Future reiterate promises of equality, it is action – driven by this united force – that will carve the path for real and lasting systemic change.

*Dr. Ruth Manorama and Dr. Pam Rajput are members of the National Alliance of Women (NAWO). Priyanka Samy is a member of NAWO's partner organisation, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW).*

*Note: An earlier version of this piece had the wrong full form for CEDAW. The error has been corrected. Sumita Ghosh's name has been added to the list of subject-matter specialists at the CU.*

## Suggested Reads



### WOMEN

Survival in the Time of Conservation: Women Demand Forest Rights in Protected Gulf of Mannar and Sundarban



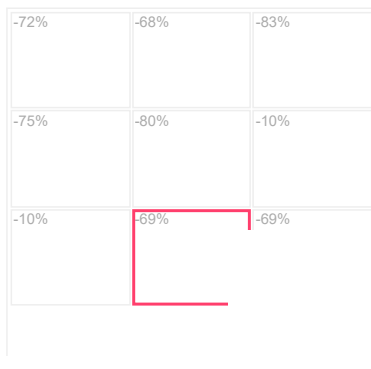
### WOMEN

Glass Ceilings, Second Shifts and Other Ills Indian Women Navigate



### WOMEN

Public Activism Has a Direct Connection to the Reporting of Gender-Based Violence in India



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