



US WOMEN'S CAUCUS AT THE UN

Beijing +25

In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action set out a comprehensive agenda for women's human rights that remains largely unfulfilled. Despite some advances, conservative governments have pushed women and girls back from the shining goal of gender equality. The United States has forfeited its leadership on women's human rights, dropping to #53 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (from #19 in 2010). Among our many areas of concern as we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the US Women's Caucus at the UN urges special attention to violence against women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and environmental policies.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS *Violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men (Beijing Platform for Action paragraph 118).*

One in three women report being victims of violence in their lifetime. Even worse, much violence against women and girls goes unreported, including rape, 'honor' crimes, forced and child marriage, stalking, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and trafficking. Women lack trust in reporting mechanisms and fear re-victimization by the police, legal system, religious leaders, and other authorities. The result is that data on violence against women and girls is woefully inadequate. Twenty-five years after the Beijing Conference, violence remains one of the most common crimes committed against women and girls, often without any form of accountability.

Violence against women and girls is both cause and consequence of gender inequality and a grave violation of female human rights. Gender-based violence must be eliminated to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the fifth Sustainable Development Goal and a critical factor in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Although progress has been made in protecting women and girls, violence in the private sphere, including physical, emotional, verbal and sexual violence, is still not a crime in many countries. In addition, new forms of violence have emerged such as online violence in social media and video games.

In the US, women face particular challenges due to gun access, as women are five times more likely to be killed if their partner owns a gun. Despite such danger, the US recently watered down the definition of domestic violence to include only physical harm at the level of a felony, excluding psychological abuse, coercion, and manipulation. On college campuses, 43% of women report experiencing violent dating behaviors, yet the US Department of Education has tried to increase protections for those accused of sexual assault, not for the female victims. The US has also rolled back the Fair Pay and Safe Workplace Act that protected women who filed sexual harassment complaints.

In the face of these challenges, women demand structural change, including legal and policy reforms to ensure accountability, transparency, and justice. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW 1979) and the Istanbul Convention (2011) provide a global blueprint for laws and policies and these important documents must be ratified and enacted in national and local laws. In those countries where international conventions are ignored, gender equality is under serious attack.

Recommendations: To advance female human rights, we call upon governments to fund support centers and shelters for women and girls, especially in marginalized communities including refugees, immigrant women, ethnic minorities, trans and LGBTQ women. We encourage governments to create specialized police and judicial units staffed by women to address gender-based violence and increase trust among victims of violence and better reporting. We call upon the US to reauthorize and fully fund the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), pass the Campus Accountability Security Act (CASA), and restore the Fair Pay and Safe Workplace Act..

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS *Unsafe abortions threaten the lives of a large number of women, representing a grave public health problem as it is primarily the poorest and youngest who take the highest risk (Beijing paragraph 97).*

As we approach Beijing's 25th anniversary, we are far from achieving its laudable goals. Today 200 million women around the world have no access to modern contraception, 25 million have unsafe abortions each year, and one in three women experiences sexual violence (www.thelancet.com, vol. 393, Feb 9, 2019).

Reproductive health care is an inseparable part of being female. We deplore the fact that the United States has taken aggressive steps to undermine women's reproductive health and as a result, lower women's life expectancy. We denounce the Trump Administration's attempts to redefine and limit the scope of reproductive rights in UN treaties. We condemn the expansion of the Mexico City gag rule, which prohibited funding for family planning NGOs providing abortion, to all NGOs that provide programs related to HIV, maternal and child health, nutrition, tuberculosis, malaria, global health security, family planning, and reproductive health, impacting over \$8 billion in US funding.

These restrictions on US foreign aid are having a huge impact. Instead of protecting life and decreasing abortions, the global gag rule has had the opposite effect with regard to HIV/AIDS infections, maternal mortality, and abortion rates. It is estimated that two million additional women will lose access to contraception resulting in 2.5 million unintended pregnancies, 870,000 unsafe abortions, and 6,900 avoidable maternal deaths (Marie Stopes International). The global gag rule is a flawed policy that undermines its own stated objectives and contributes directly to maternal mortality.

In the US, funds for women's health clinics under Title X have been drastically reduced due to Targeted Regulations Against Abortion Providers (TRAP) laws, cutting off access for many poor and rural women. US maternal mortality has risen dramatically, increasing from 7.2 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1987 to 16.9 deaths in 2016 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Poor access to health care is a key factor.

Recommendations: We call upon the United States and other UN member states to respect the reproductive role of women and to protect, not inhibit, their health care needs. Denying women their sexual and reproductive health and rights does not preserve or protect families but sacrifices the health of millions of women and girls and weakens families. Family planning services are essential to women's health and the most sensible avenue to reduce unwanted pregnancies. We demand that the United States rescind the gag rule at home and abroad, increase Title X funding for women's health, and expand pre-natal and maternal health programs, especially in rural and underserved areas.

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT *Poverty and environmental degradation are closely interrelated. While poverty results in certain kinds of environmental stress, the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries (Beijing Platform for Action, paragraph 246).*

The Beijing Platform for Action laid out environmental concerns and recommendations that have only grown in meaning and significance over the past 25 years. The close connections among environmental degradation, poverty, gender-based violence, and armed conflict have become more evident over time. The deterioration of national resources, including our climate, is resulting in downward spirals that are creating massive conflicts and human migrations.

Although women hold basic knowledge, skills, and grass-root connections to minimize waste and protect fragile ecosystems, they have been largely absent at all levels of policy formation and decision-making in natural resource and environmental management. However, women's exclusion from climate decision-making is beginning to change. The United Nations is playing a critical role by integrating all these factors with the Sustainable Development Goals. Towards these goals, the Conference of the Parties recently adopted a new 5-year Lima Work Program to achieve gender balance and gender-responsive climate policy. The COP Agenda asserts that equal participation in climate policy development is vital to achieve long-term climate goals. We believe that integrating women into climate decision-making offers a chance to see things differently, revealing strategic options for new and renewed efforts toward meeting human rights and international sustainable development commitments.

Recommendations: We call upon the United States to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement, to stop the roll back of vital environmental laws, and to implement gender-responsive climate policies that include gender-equal access to decision making, equitable benefit sharing, and gender-informed analyses and reporting.

The US Women's Caucus at the UN supports fully the efforts of the United Nations to gather the world's peoples together to work for equality, development, and peace for all. To support those goals, we call upon the United States to pay its dues to the United Nations in full and on time. **Great nations pay their dues and honor their commitments!**