

EMERGING ISSUES IN WOMEN'S HEALTH AND RIGHTS:

Discussions From Women 2000

In June 2000, United Nations delegates from over 178 member states gathered in New York City to reaffirm their commitment to women's rights. Meeting to review progress on the Platform for Action of the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, they also identified initiatives for speeding up implementation of the Beijing Platform, including such areas of concern as health, education, and poverty. The delegates also recognized that the 21st century has brought new challenges to women's lives:

- **HIV/AIDS:** For biological and socioeconomic reasons, women are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. HIV infects women in the prime of life when their multiple roles in the economy and household are most crucial to society's well-being.
- **Globalization:** The new global market, with its increasingly rapid flow of goods and information throughout the world, is changing women's roles in the economy. While creating new job opportunities for women, globalization may also widen the divide between rich and poor.
- **Armed Conflict:** In war and civil conflict, women often become refugees vulnerable to abuse. Left out of decisionmaking, women are also unable to contribute to peacekeeping processes.

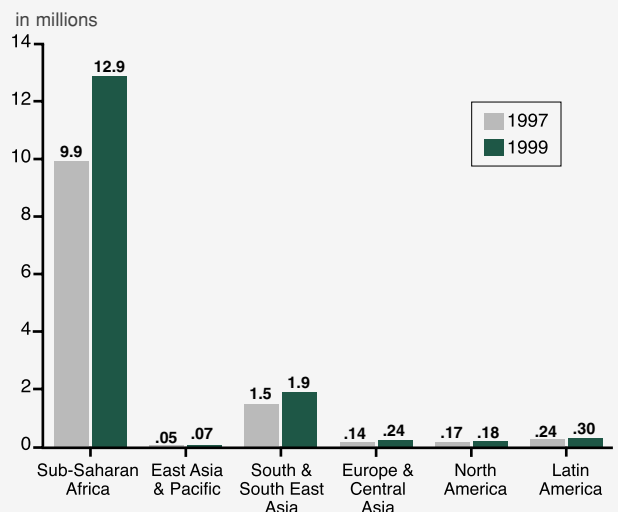
Background

In September 1995, roughly 17,000 participants, including some 4,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), gathered in Beijing, China, for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, the largest gathering of government and NGO representatives ever held. A parallel NGO forum brought the total participants to over 47,000. The resulting documents, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, have been heralded as landmarks for women's rights worldwide. Drawing on the 1993 Vienna Human Rights Conference, Beijing placed gender equality in a human rights framework. The Platform highlighted obstacles to women's progress throughout the world and set strategies for addressing 12 areas of concern: poverty, education and training, health, violence against women,

armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child.

In June 2000, some 4,000 UN delegates and NGO representatives met in New York City for the 23rd Special Session of the UN General Assembly: "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development, and Peace for the 21st Century." Many more attended concurrent NGO events, bringing the total number of participants to an estimated 10,000. The Special Session, also known as "Beijing +5," assessed national and international progress in implementing the Beijing Platform. The outcome document of Women 2000 updates the Platform in the areas of violence against and trafficking in women, health, education, human rights, poverty, debt relief, globalization, armed conflict, sovereignty, land and inheritance rights, and political participation. Besides declaring that women have the right to freely decide all matters related to their sexuality and childbearing, the Women 2000 document is the first international consensus to address honor

Figure 1
Women living with AIDS in 1997 and 1999



SOURCE: Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic June 2000 (Geneva: UNAIDS), and 1998 Women of Our World (Washington, DC: PRB).

killings and forced marriage. In addition, several new issues emerged as particularly relevant to women's well-being, including HIV/AIDS, globalization, and armed conflict.

HIV/AIDS

In his opening address to the Special Session, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan acknowledged HIV/AIDS as a new challenge to the global community. At the end of 1999, 34.3 million people worldwide were living with HIV/AIDS—15.7 million were women, up from 12.1 million in 1997 (see Figure 1, page 1). Women were more than 40 percent of the 5.4 million people infected in 1999 alone.¹ In sub-Saharan Africa, women are being infected with HIV/AIDS at higher rates than men. This is particularly true among young Africans.² In Africa, 12 women are living with HIV for every 10 men with HIV.

Women, and young women in particular, are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS for biological and

socioeconomic reasons. Sexually active, unmarried adolescents, in general, are at high risk of contracting HIV because they have multiple, short-term sexual relationships, do not consistently use condoms, and lack sufficient information to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. Adolescent women are at a biological disadvantage because they have fewer protective antibodies than older women, and the immaturity of a young woman's cervix increases the likelihood that exposure to the infection will result in transmission of the disease. In addition, sexual violence and exploitation, lack of formal education (including sexuality education), inability to negotiate with partners about sexual decisions, and lack of access to reproductive health services work together to put young women at especially high risk.³

HIV/AIDS is more than a health issue; it is also an economic and development issue. Women's roles as mothers, caregivers, and wage earners are profoundly influenced by the disease. Mary Nagu, the Minister for Community Development, Women's Affairs and Children of the United Republic of Tanzania, stated that HIV/AIDS has hindered her country's efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

HIV/AIDS will have a tremendous impact on future rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality, life expectancy, and economic growth.⁴ Many women with HIV/AIDS become infertile or die before the end of their reproductive years. In Zimbabwe, the likelihood that a 15-year-old will die before the end of her reproductive years quadrupled, from around 11 percent in the early 1980s to over 40 percent by 1997.⁵ One third of the infants born to HIV-positive mothers will succumb to the disease. In addition, the AIDS epidemic has left behind 13.2 million orphans, transforming family structures worldwide.⁶

The Women 2000 document sets responsible behavior and gender equality as important prerequisites for HIV/AIDS prevention, supported by effective strategies to empower women to have control over their sexual practices. Looking at the AIDS epidemic in terms of changing sexual behavior is an important shift that calls for preventive education and male responsibility, as well as women's empowerment.⁷ This shift reflects key advances made in the five-year review process of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

Table 1
Percentage of working-age men and women in the labor force, 1980 and 1997, selected regions

	1980		1997	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Africa				
Northern Africa	21	79	29	77
Sub-Saharan Africa	63	88	62	86
Southern Africa	52	85	47	77
Rest of sub-Saharan Africa	64	89	64	87
Latin America and the Caribbean				
Caribbean	44	75	53	75
Central America	31	85	39	83
South America	29	81	45	78
Asia				
Eastern Asia	57	83	60	80
South East Asia	59	86	62	84
Southern Asia	44	88	45	84
Central Asia	63	76	59	75
Western Asia	28	80	33	78
Oceania^a				
Oceania	58	88	57	83
More developed regions				
Eastern Europe	57	76	53	70
Western Europe	42	75	49	69
Other more developed regions	47	78	55	74

SOURCE: *The World's Women 2000* (New York: United Nations, 2000). Prepared by the Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat from International Labour Organization, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* (Geneva, 1999), table 1.

^a Sparse data for this subregion; average should be interpreted with caution.

Globalization

Globalization—the increasingly rapid flow of information, goods, and money around the world—played a prominent role in people’s lives in the second half of the 20th century.⁸ The positive and negative aspects of globalization were widely discussed at Women 2000.

Globalization has encouraged women’s participation in the market economy by creating new job opportunities. Demand for women’s labor has expanded, and women are currently over 40 percent of the global labor force.⁹ While women’s economic activity rates have increased in many regions, men’s have decreased (see Table 1). Yet, many women still lack access to paid employment and financial resources. Poverty has a clear gender dimension—women comprise 70 percent of the world’s 1.3 billion poor.¹⁰ At the Beijing meeting, solutions focused on providing women with financial assistance, such as microcredit lending programs that provide small amounts of credit for self-employment and other financial and business services to women who have little or no collateral or assets.¹¹

Women 2000 delegations from several countries, including Nigeria and Jamaica, made globalization a key issue in their country statements, portraying globalization as an obstacle to achieving the Platform of Action goals. For example, they argued that globalization can create competition between large-scale and small-scale or informal economic activities, threatening the livelihoods of millions of women who most often work in small-scale enterprises. Even in large-scale, formal-sector economic activities, women are often in low-paid and low-skill jobs. From this perspective, globalization can be seen as an obstacle to economic justice. NGOs and UN delegates called for more assessment of globalization’s impact on women’s lives.

A central component of globalization is information and communication technology (ICT). The Women 2000 meeting recognized ICTs as one of the ways globalization can have a positive impact on women’s lives. The ability of women to participate in global markets and enjoy some of the benefits of trade liberalization is largely dependent on access to new information technology.¹² However, women in less developed countries often lack access to this new technology.

Discussions about the benefits of technology focused mainly on the Internet economy rather than on technology’s ability to promote social change. However, the Women 2000 document

“All these challenges, old and new, are part of the complex, interconnected world we now live in. They can be met only if we enable women to build on the best this new world has to offer, rather than condemn them to suffer the worst of it.”

—Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General

emphasizes the Internet’s important role in improving the global sharing of information, research, and lessons learned from women’s experiences achieving gender equality, development, and peace.

Armed Conflict

Armed conflict has a range of health and demographic consequences for women. Some 50 million people around the world may be described as refugees or victims of forced internal displacement.¹³ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, women and girls account for 60 percent to 90 percent of the world’s refugee populations, including internally displaced persons.

In areas of armed conflict, women and men face different obstacles. Since men are more likely to leave home to participate in armed conflict, women remain behind to maintain and support households in economically and politically unstable environments. As women are widowed, this role often becomes permanent. For example, after massive internal conflict in the first half of the 1990s, Rwanda’s population was estimated, in 1996, to be 70 percent female, and 50 percent of households were headed by women.¹⁴ After Rwandan refugees were repatriated, the population was estimated to be 54 percent female, and 37 percent of households were headed by women. New family structures also emerge, as women care for orphans and other dependents. These kinds of changes to women’s status undermine their well-being.

Women who live in areas of armed conflict, or who are refugees, often suffer acts of sexual violence. In war, rape is used as a tool for destroying certain ethnic or racial groups. Sometimes the intent is to injure women severely enough to prevent them from getting pregnant or giving birth. Other times, forced pregnancy is thought to “dilute” particular ethnic or racial groups. According to the National Population Office of Rwanda,

survivors of rape have given birth to an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 children, in what are called “pregnancies of war.”

Although women refugees are vulnerable to sexual violence, they often do not have access to the health services necessary to address the consequences of that violence. Refugees with few financial resources may be forced to choose food and water over contraception. The breakdown of family support networks means that young men and women lose traditional sources of information, assistance, and protection. Women without access to a steady income or family support may even resort to selling sex for money. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) spread fastest where there is poverty, powerlessness, and social instability. Without access to reproductive health services, STIs—including HIV/AIDS—can quickly reach epidemic proportions.

The Women 2000 document recommends that policies and programs in war-torn areas incorporate a gender perspective, and that women be included in peace processes. Rwanda’s activities to promote peace exemplify this spirit. *Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe*—a women’s organization—has launched a program entitled, “Action Campaign for Peace,” and an International Peace Conference on Women as Partners for Peace was held in June 2000, to bring together women from different parts of Africa to deliberate on strategies for including women in more substantive ways.

Conclusion

As in previous UN meetings, NGOs were actively involved in Women 2000. The meeting assessed women’s rights in the context of human rights, and discussed how to monitor and protect these rights. As with all aspects of women’s lives, the issues and challenges emerging from Women 2000 cannot be seen in isolation. Each issue affects the other, just as women’s lives around the globe are interconnected.

The Women 2000 meeting gave governments an opportunity to reaffirm publicly their commitment to women’s health and rights. These commitments give guidance and impetus to initiatives at the national and local levels, where real change must take place.

For Further Information:

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS:
www.unaids.org

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:
www.unhchr.ch

Beijing +5 Final Report: www.un.org/womenwatch/followup/beijing5/index.html

References

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- ² *Ibid.*: 11.
- ³ Anne Boyd, *Meeting Young Women’s Reproductive and Sexual Health Needs* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2000): 3.
- ⁴ UNAIDS, *Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic June 2000*: 7.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*: 24.
- ⁶ Anne Boyd, *Meeting Young Women’s Reproductive and Sexual Health Needs*: 27.
- ⁷ *NGO Alternative Global Report to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session 5 Years after Beijing, June 5-9, 2000* (New York: Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, 2000): 53.
- ⁸ United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), *Progress of the World’s Women 2000: UNIFEM Biennial Report* (New York: UNIFEM, 2000): 130.
- ⁹ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Decent Work for Women: An ILO Proposal to Accelerate the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action* (Geneva: ILO, 2000): 3.
- ¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1995* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 4.
- ¹¹ ILO, *Decent Work for Women*: 130.
- ¹² *Ibid.*: 137-138.
- ¹³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of the World’s Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997): 2.
- ¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996): 2.

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