

# LINKAGE BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CAIRO/BEIJING AGENDA FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Making general statements on the correlation between the effects of socio-economic development and the situation of women is difficult because the political, economic, and structural conditions differ greatly from one country to the other. However, nowhere in the world are women treated as equal as men or enjoy the same opportunities as men. All countries slip on the human development scale when inequality between the sexes is measured. Differences between the life situations and opportunities of men and women still arise from unequal access to employment, income, economic resources, health care, food, education, training, etc.

Social development, including fundamental changes in traditional family and social structures, migration, urbanization, the contrast between "traditional" and "modern" ways of life, and often unfavorable economic development for the majority of the people, have a significant influence on the role and status of women in most developing countries. Recent reviews of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, adopted at the Women's Conference in 1985, shows clearly that, in spite of the progress achieved, particularly in the areas of education and health, since the Women's Conference in Mexico twenty years ago, gender disparities exist today in many fields, and there remains an unfinished agenda for progress in gender equality and women's empowerment.

As we enter the 21st century, the situation of women in the developing countries can be characterized as follows: (1) 500,000 women still die each year from pregnancy and pregnancy-related causes, and (2) 120 million women in developing countries who want to delay birth or childbearing have no access to contraception. Women earn one-tenth of the world's income. Their wage rates are, on average, three-fourths those of men because they are concentrated in the low-paying, non-formal

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sector and receive a lower wage for equal work. In spite of progress in education, women still constitute 60% of the 1 billion adults who have no access to basic education, and girls represent 90 million of the 960 million (10.6%) with no access to primary education. Although there has been economic progress in some developing countries, particularly in Asia and Latin America, one-fifth of the world's population still live in absolute poverty, with women accounting for 70% of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor. This explains why poverty is described as having a "woman's face." Two million girls undergo female circumcision every year. Women still constitute less than one-seventh of top administrators and managers in developing countries. Women are exposed to all types of violence in all countries.

Taking into account the above situation of women, development becomes the most important challenge facing the human race. The lack of progress in the last twenty years in the eradication of poverty, the growing proportion of women among the poor, and the violation of their rights are among the most important threats to the progress of development and its sustainability. As long as three-quarters of the world's population continue to suffer from acute deprivation, as long as profound imbalances in global consumption continue to persist, and, more important, as long as the spread of poverty, particularly among women, continues unchecked, there can be no development. The history of the development process shows again and again that the improvement of the status of women is one of the key variables in finding solutions to the poverty crisis.

There is a tendency that new inequalities may emerge with globalization, the destabilization of national economies by war and conflict, and the cut-back in budgetary allocations to social sector programmes resulting from structural adjustment policies currently being implemented in most Sub-Sahara African countries; all these have made it difficult to sustain the limited gains made in many countries over the last twenty years.

As Mahbub ul Haq wrote in the publication, *Women: Looking Beyond 2000*, "[o]ne is presently faced with two contrasting trends—increasing female capabilities on the one side, and restricted opportunities on the other. Such a wide gap between capabilities and opportunities leads to a considerable waste of women's potential and, naturally, to a rising level of frustration." The struggle for equal opportunities for both men and women will definitely change most of the developing countries' premises for social, economic, and political development.

## II. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

In the past few years, a number of international conferences have been organized under the aegis of the UN to find solutions to key global problems and to establish policy directions at the national, regional, and inter-regional levels. These conferences have also greatly contributed to raising the awareness of countries to these issues and have provided the fora for useful exchange and debate. This discussion will focus on two of these conferences: the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which took place in September 1994 in Cairo, and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), which took place in Beijing in September 1995.

A brief mention of other international conferences would underscore the fact that the one recurring theme at these conferences relates to gender equality, women's empowerment, and women's pivotal role in development. The outcomes of these conferences have highlighted the realization of the world community that women's empowerment issues are development issues, and should be treated as such, in an integrated and holistic manner.

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, governments recognized that policies would fail if women were not involved. At the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, governments declared that the rights of girls and women were an "inalienable, integral and indivisible" part of human rights, and transcended nationality and culture; Governments agreed at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen earlier this year that development could not be achieved, nor poverty eradicated, without investment in women.

At the ICPD, a "new development paradigm" was proclaimed. It was agreed that development in the future was to concentrate on the individual and less on growth rates. The ICPD Programme of Action places human rights and well-being explicitly at the centre of all activities to achieve sustainable development. Thus, it is squarely based on the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Rather than emphasizing human numbers and demographic targets, it stresses the well-being of individual women and men, and the need to invest in their health and education, in building equity and equality between the sexes, in eradicating poverty, in the universal provision of integrated health services, freedom of choice and absence of coercion in family planning, and reproductive and sexual health programs. The ICPD Programme of Action is remarkable for its clear recognition of the need to empower women through, *inter alia*, investing in their education, and the

need to promote equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in the home and in reproductive health matters. It thus calls for a new action agenda that will make women full partners with men in all aspects of the social, economic, and political lives of their countries and communities.

The Beijing Conference had a lot to build on and effectively brought together the gender equality and women's empowerment strategies of all the conferences into an inclusive and comprehensive Platform for Action. It reaffirmed the following commitments made in Cairo:

- (1) universal access to quality health services including reproductive and sexual health services which are to be provided within the context of primary health care;
- (2) reproductive health information and services for adolescents, "taking into account the rights of the child to access to information, privacy, confidentiality, respect, and informed consent, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and legal guardians. In all actions concerning children, the interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." (para. 267 of Platform for Action);
- (3) reduction of maternal and infant mortality;
- (4) equal access of women to land, credit, rewarding employment;
- (5) reduction in the gender gap in education;
- (6) elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls;
- (7) promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls;
- (8) promoting partnership between men and women in household responsibilities and reproductive health matters;
- (9) promoting the participation of women in all decision-making and power structures;
- (10) putting people at the centre of the development equation by understanding their needs;
- (11) bringing women into the mainstream of development as an important end in itself and as a key to improving the quality of life of everyone.

The Beijing Platform for Action advances some of the core and contentious issues debated at length in Cairo - namely, issues relating to the decriminalization of abortion and the consideration of reproductive and sexual rights as part of human rights. It also made progress in the need to monetise the non-market work of women.

The Platform proposes specific actions to address the problems that women face. Like the Cairo Programme of Action, it aims at changing the *status quo* and ensuring that human development, which is an integral part of sustainable development, can be engendered. Through these conferences, governments acknowledged the validity of human-centred sustainable development as an important factor for achieving peace and

stability. They also recognized that it is imperative to address the "gender" dimension if lasting solutions should be found to social and economic development problems.

### III. IMPLEMENTATION

How do we translate the new vision of a better future into reality? This will be a difficult and long process, but one that is attainable considering the success that has been made in many development policy and programme initiatives. For example, a recent World Bank report clearly showed that policies aimed at improving the welfare of women lead to higher productivity, more rapid human capital formation, slower population growth, and faster economic growth. The Demographic and Health Surveys which have been carried out in most developing countries have also shown that investing in girls' and women's education and health is the most important means to break the cycle of low status, poverty, and large families.

The implementation of the agenda outlined in the Cairo Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action for women's empowerment and gender equality is a shared responsibility of all governments (developing and developed countries) and other actors at the national level, and regional and international institutions. The primary responsibility, however, rests with countries. Commitment at the highest level is essential for its implementation. There is need for new development policies, strategies, new approaches to development planning, new development thinking and practices that include the perspectives and realities of women's lives, and that will empower both men and women to participate in the design and implementation of key decisions that shape their lives.

Societies and communities will have to stop valuing women only for their reproductive role, start putting more value on women's social and economic contributions to development, and capitalizing on women's organizational abilities, strengths, and resourcefulness. The ability of women to exercise choices in regard to their fertility will definitely allow them to participate more effectively in social, political, and economic activities.

Gender impact analysis will need to be undertaken to ensure that development policies and programmes benefit women and men equally. This means that governments from now on will need to undertake systematic reviews of how women and men benefit from public sector expenditures. Development priorities and the distribution of resources will need to be re-examined to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to

the women's empowerment agenda, particularly to health including reproductive and sexual health, education, credit and capacity building. Countries implementing structural adjustment programmes will have to ensure that they include activities aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Governments should tap the resources of the private sector for the implementation of the ICPD and Beijing agenda. Partnerships should be forged with NGOs which are the important voices of individual women and girls. NGOs in developing countries are recognized for their innovative, flexible, and responsive programme design and implementation, including grass-roots participatory processes, and provide effective means of better focusing local and national developmental initiatives. Policy and legal reforms and affirmative action should be undertaken to ensure equality of opportunities in the social, economic and political spheres. Urgent action should be taken by governments, which have not already done so, to ratify and also implement CEDAW.

UN agencies also have responsibilities within their mandates to assist governments implement the commitments made at the Beijing and Cairo Conferences. At the request of the UN Secretary-General, and to ensure a coordinated response within the UN system, the Executive Director of UNFPA, who was also the Secretary-General of the ICPD, convenes and chairs an Inter-agency Task Force on the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action. The Task Force has five working groups, one of which deals with women's empowerment. The guidelines developed by the working groups to assist the UN Resident Coordinator system in ICPD follow-up will facilitate follow-up to the Beijing Conference as well.

At UNFPA, changes have been made in institutional structures, policy guidelines, and operational procedures and partnerships with non-governmental organizations are being expanded. UNFPA field offices are supporting governments to develop plans of action for ICPD implementation. These plans will include appropriate actions reflecting the Beijing recommendations.

UNFPA will build on its achievements and further advance its commitment to addressing concerns regarding the status of women by focusing on gender, population, and development as a cross-cutting issue in all its priority programme areas, namely, reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health, population and development strategies, and advocacy. In so doing, the Fund will support programmes promoting women's health over their life span, women's reproductive and sexual health and rights, elimination of all discrimination and violence against

women and girls, education and male involvement in reproductive health activities, and will emphasize gender awareness in all its programmes.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Past strategies have not yet brought women to where they need to be. All the UN conferences have attempted to make governments accountable to women, and that demands the re-examination of priorities, the re-allocation of resources, as well as commitment to urgent and specific actions. It entails the enactment, review and enforcement of laws so as to afford women equal opportunities and development. Accountability requires policies for involving and advancing women in social, political, and economic decision-making. Governments must take the lead role in ensuring that institutional and financial arrangements are made to enable and motivate national institutions to carry out all the commitments they have made.