

International Women's Day: Where are we in 2004? US Committee for UNIFEM Lunch

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It's a great pleasure to be here today at the UNIFEM lunch. Women NGOS count on UNIFEM to support our advocacy at the UN and to help amplify women's voices in global and national spaces.

On International Women's Day, I like to focus on progress and movement – it is a time to celebrate the achievements of women. Women around the world do this quite vibrantly – the most exciting March 8th that I ever spent was in India in 1987 where I was impressed by the creativity of theater performances and the mass demonstrations that women held. Women in the US could use some of that spirit of celebration on this day.

Talking of progress is important and we need to keep in mind that women have advanced over the past century in amazing ways. It is a remarkable story after several thousand years of patriarchy. But today, I cannot speak only of progress but must also acknowledge a sense of urgency about the current world situation and the backlash threatening women's rights in so many places on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women.

PROGRESS

In the 1990's, the UN and its World Conferences held out great promise for a more comprehensive and inclusive future for the human rights of all, including women and including socio-economic rights. It was a time when the world talked of a peace dividend – post cold war. It was certainly not the time we live in now in 2004. Yet, many of the problems that plague us today, like fundamentalism, were ones women were speaking about even then when optimism prevailed.

The Center for Women's Global Leadership felt it was important to remember the advances made in pursuing human rights in the last decade, especially at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Therefore, we conducted a survey and held an International Consultation on Progress & Challenges for women's human rights to mark the 10th anniversary of Vienna in 2003. (The full results are posted on our website: www.cwgl.rutgers.edu)

It is informative to note what came up most often as progress in the survey:

- Increased awareness of and the passage of laws against violence against women;
- The appointment and work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women;
- The growing attention to issues of women in armed conflict and the inclusion of these concerns in the statute of the new International Criminal Court, and in Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security;
- More women's political participation in both governmental and civil society arenas.

I would like to build on that in outlining what I see as the main areas of progress for women's human rights over the past decade.

1. Awareness, recognition and legitimacy of women's issues and gender as a factor in all areas from human rights to development has increased vastly, and especially around Violence Against Women (VAW).

The 1990's opened up new avenues in discourse and practice for women – bringing increased awareness of the massive daily violations of women's basic rights to bodily integrity (VAW, rape as a war crime, vast numbers of missing women, high rates of preventable maternal mortality, etc.), as well as the often stark sex discrimination in areas like food, education, and the right to property and inheritance. It also revealed many women's lack of access to justice and the basic conditions necessary for exercising their human rights. As a consequence of this growing awareness, women are on the agenda more than ever before – from the UN's Millennium Development Goals to Amnesty International's recently launched six-year VAW campaign.

2. International standard setting on gender specific forms of persecution and abuse has developed over the past decade, with a growing body of work in this area.

Most notable in terms of outlining new standards for women's human rights are the UN Declaration on the Elimination of VAW and the work of the Special Rapporteur on VAW that has elaborated on this; the Ad hoc criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda and the ICC statutes on rape, forced pregnancy, and gender based persecution; and Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. In addition, a number of UN treaty bodies and special rapporteurs have begun to outline the specific gender implications of standards in their areas of work, like social and economic rights, or gender in relation to specific populations like refugees.

3. New institutions and mechanisms to address women's rights have been created at the global, regional, national and local levels.

In the effort to make the standards come closer to being realized in women's lives, increased attention has also been paid to creating mechanisms of implementation. The CEDAW committee has increased its meeting time and many countries have agreed to its new Optional Protocol that gives the treaty more teeth; the Inter-American Convention Against VAW adopted by the Americas has provided the first binding regional treaty in this area which women have begun to use nationally; the new Optional Protocol on Women's Human Rights to the African Charter on Peoples and Human Rights seeks to expand attention to women in Africa; further, in both Africa and Latin America, the regional human rights systems have appointed Special Rapporteurs on Women's Rights. At the national and local level, there are not only more laws addressing women's concerns, but one of the most creative tools developed has been Gender Budgets used to analyze how much resources a government devotes to meeting women's needs.

4. There has been an increase in women as actors on the global stage.

There are more women in key positions in institutions and governments than ever before – although clearly not enough. The most notable advance at the global level is the election of 7 women out of 18 judges to the newly formed ICC. For the first time, a critical mass of women will sit in judgment at this level. The Women's Caucus for Gender Justice in the ICC achieved this through the demand for gender as well as regional affirmative action measures in the process for the election of judges. Yes, quotas do work --- if you want to have women (and other marginalized groups) better represented in power. To date, only

those countries that have some form of affirmative action have achieved a critical mass of at least 30% women in national legislatures.

Above all, women have become a global constituency as greater numbers of women are engaged in addressing global issues. This includes the many women who now look to UN institutions like the CEDAW Committee and other bodies in the search for justice and redress for abuse. This has brought a new energy and constituency to human rights and to the UN. In fact, women are among the greatest backers of the UN worldwide, including in the US. Women's energy is visible here at the Commission on the Status of Women this year in the outstanding leadership being taken by young women from around the world in the women, peace, and security caucus. But expectations have also been raised and the weaknesses of these processes in terms of implementation have also been exposed, which brings me to examining some of the challenges and obstacles to realizing the promises made to women central to the review of the Beijing Platform for Action (B + 10).

CHALLENGES

1. GLOBALIZATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUITY – Global and national inequities and female poverty have been fueled by globalization, structural adjustment, privatization, the growth of information technologies, and the lack of governmental accountability for socio-economic rights and basic human needs.

Globalization has had both positive and negative affects on women, but for far too many it has become synonymous with the growth of glaring global inequities in access to resources, information, and power. We need to globalize gender equality and women's rights, rather than female poverty.

Women are still the poorest of the poor, and the gap between women who benefit and those who don't has grown. Based on current trends - the gender gap within the digital divide and the rate of female illiteracy will continue unless much more resources are committed to this, which is after all the first indicator under the gender equality goal of the MDGs. Development experts continue to say that improving women's status is the key to development and national progress, but few resources are committed to achieving this goal. We must look critically at why this does not happen.

Women also bear the greatest burden of the decline in social services with the privatization of public/state functions. We have a huge stake in both national and international governmental accountability for basic human needs and the development of human rights methods to hold the forces of globalization - international financial institutions as well as non-state actors like corporations - accountable for the impact of their actions on society.

Women as leaders must seek to move beyond the dichotomy between rampant unchecked global capitalist development and patriarchal fundamentalist "traditionalism." We must seek to influence the direction of globalization and make it more equitable. In the words of the AWID campaign: GLOBALIZE WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT

2. FUNDAMENTALISM(s) – The rise of POLITICAL MOVEMENTS based on extremist expressions of religious and/or nationalistic “fundamentalisms” threaten progress on women’s rights in the name of many diverse religions and cultures

Backlash against women’s rights has grown as extremist forces in all the major religions – often called “fundamentalists” have focused on the control of women as symbols of their identity and culture. Frequently such forces form political alliances with each other and/or with others who oppose gender equality – as seen in the battles focused on reproductive and sexual rights fought at the UN World Conferences in Cairo and Beijing as well as in their + 5 reviews and at the Children’s Summit in 2001.

Feminists in all regions, from Algeria, Poland, Brazil and India to the USA, have been speaking up against these fundamentalisms, whether they come in Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or nationalistic garb. Women challenge the cultural and/or religious justifications given for the subordination of women and are seeking more creative ways to talk about how to respect various forms of diversity while affirming the universality of human rights.

Universality means everyone has a universal right to all human rights without discrimination. However, this does not mean that all women’s (or men’s) lives are the same, or that their experiences, strategies or choices in affirming their rights are or need to be identical. Indeed, human rights can only be universal in practice when they are looked at in terms of the full diversity of people’s experiences and when diverse remedies are shaped in response to different factors that deny different people access to the same basic human rights.

Women must shift this debate away from its collision course, which does not serve well either cultural diversity or women’s human rights, and is particularly damaging to the rights of women in the global South.

3. BODILY INTEGRITY AND VIOLENCE IN DAILY LIFE – The persistence of sexist and racist violence in daily life and the denial of women’s rights to control their bodies in reproductive matters and sexuality remains central, and is particularly impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the growth of trafficking in persons.

Violence against women has received greater attention in the past decade and is often seen as symbolic of the violation of women’s human rights. Indeed one of UNIFEM’s great contributions has been raising the visibility of this issue and supporting NGOS who work on it through the Trust Fund on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Yet, there is no discernable decline in the incidence of such violence, little real resources or political will are committed to ending it, and there is not enough state attention to data to measure the problem and to evaluate what has worked. We must take a hard look at why this is the case.

Family and domestic life continue to be the major site of coercion, violence, and denial of the rights of women and girls. Yet the culture of impunity toward perpetrators of VAW is almost universal – N/S and E/W. Most perpetrators count upon getting away with such violence – not only legally but also in the eyes of their family and community. All forms of violence against women persist to some extent because of this cultural acceptance of such acts, and fears of confronting them. Challenging this impunity and the acceptance of a culture of daily violence against women is central to diminishing this problem.

Radhika Coomarasamy's final report as UN Special Rapporteur on VAW notes that it is rooted in culture and in control of female sexuality. Indeed, issues of VAW, reproductive health, and sexuality are at the heart of human insecurity for women. There is no more intimate issue of human rights than the control of your body and freedom from violation of it – that is why much human rights work began with the issue of torture. But for women, this torture is often in their own homes and by those who they love.

Further, these issues are complex and often inter-related with other problems. Many aspects of violence against women and denial of bodily integrity are shaped by the intersection of race, ethnicity, age, poverty, culture, sexual orientation, and other factors with gender. For example, most maternal mortality among the poor could be prevented at little cost if these women's right to life were taken seriously. To end VAW therefore requires addressing these complex intersections as well.

Trafficking of women which has finally become public as a major issue of women's rights also results from multiple social and economic crises along with gender inequality, and it can not be solved in isolation from addressing the many factors that make women vulnerable to it. Similarly, the HIV/AIDS epidemic clearly has gender, race, geographic and class specific impacts on women that must be addressed to deal effectively with the problem.

4. MILITARISM – The preoccupation with national security post September 11 and the increase in militarism, wars and internal conflicts that affect women and undermine all human rights both increases the direct violence women experience and undermines other social goals that women care about.

Even before 9/11, national, racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts were proliferating and led to increasing forms of abuse of women. Challenging a culture of violence in a world where fortunes are made on arms sales, wars, and media violence has always been a daunting task. In the wake of the events of 9/11 and their use by governments as an excuse for curtailing human rights and expanding military and security budgets, it has grown even more difficult.

The Report of the UN Commission on Human Security redefines global security in terms of human and ecological needs instead of national borders defended by militarism. This approach to human security as an alternative to a state centered "national security" doctrine holds much promise for women who should both use it and be advocates for its principles.

Attention needs to be brought to implementing Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for involving women in all aspects of peace making. But we must also seek to rescue respect for international human rights, the UN and the concept of multi-lateralism from a world that is rapidly undermining the possibility of human security and fanning the fires of fundamentalism that will further erode women's rights around the world.

In working for a culture of peace, we must also recognize the ways in which militarism reinforces and is reinforced by domestic forms of violence against women and against all those labeled as the "other", such as racial or cultural minorities, lesbians and gays, Roma or Dalit peoples, migrants and foreigners, etc.

Acceptance of domination in the home builds acceptance of violence in the public sphere as way to resolve conflict and deal with difference that feeds racism, ethnic conflict, homophobic violence, and militarism. And these also reinforce violence in the private

sphere. Violence must be challenged at all points across the spectrum. When violence and the denial of the humanity of any group is excused and normalized – in the family, school or as part of armed conflict -- it is not only an abuse of that group but also feeds impunity toward the violation of human rights more generally.

CONCLUSION

Women must be recognized as AGENTS of cultural and political discussion and change and not just seen as VICTIMS or subjects of culture as well as understood to have things to say about more than just gender. There is a need to create greater space and opportunity for women with various perspectives to be heard AS PUBLIC LEADERS – in elected office and as public writers and shapers of opinion.

Women also need space and time to work together and devise solutions across geopolitical and cultural lines. The UN World Conferences helped to provide venues for such exchange that fueled the growth of a global women's movement. Other ways for women to meet across cultural and national lines to address global challenges must be developed, especially since there are few such UN conferences.

All these challenges must be addressed in the Beijing + 10 review process. Forces like inequitable globalization, fundamentalism, and militarism have become obstacles to the implementation of the promises made to women in Beijing. We should make Beijing + 10 a women's review of issues in the world from the MDGs to militarism and use it to advance women's leadership for new directions that our world so desperately needs. UNIFEM has a vital role to play in enabling women around the globe to meet these challenges.