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country report

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Declarations on Their Own Won't Change the Course

25 years after the Beijing Conference on Women's rights

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In 1995, the 4th World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. This year, we are not only celebrating the 25th anniversary of the conference, but also the 75th anniversary of the UN which has a pivotal role in upholding human rights and women's rights. Hence, the United Nations General Assembly had decided to hold a high-level meeting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women just after the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly.



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What made the Beijing Conference so ground-breaking for women's rights?

189 countries adopted in 1995 the Platform of Action which concentrated on 12 "critical areas of concern" namely poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child, areas taken up later in the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals.

Then and now, Germany placed an emphasis on human rights and particularly women rights.

Claudia Nolte, Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Women, Senior Citizens and Youth at the time of the Beijing conference, highlighted in her statement the point that human rights for women are an integral part of the universal, indivisible and inalienable human rights. An emphasis was put on ending violence against women through laws such as making rape within marriage illegal and strengthening laws against human trafficking. Internationally, Germany committed to working on educating women about their rights and how they can assert them.

Furthermore, the Minister made it clear that "absolute poverty and structural discrimination still deny women in many parts of the world access to education, employment and economic independence. Women remain largely excluded from political, economical and social decision-making. That is why we need economic empowerment of women."¹

What kind of balance sheet has Germany been able to draw at the high-level meeting this year?

Angela Merkel made it very clear in her statement that "25 years later equality should be a given, but we still have a long way to go to achieve SDG5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)".² Additionally, COVID-19 worsens the situation by increasing poverty amongst women and worsens violence against women. The pandemic has highlighted that

women are more affected by it but are underrepresented in decision-making positions.

Globally, Germany focuses on working for fair labor standards and is actively supporting the "[Generation Equality](#)"-process with focus on economic justice and combating violence against women.

Chancellor Merkel also pointed out that equality can only be achieved when women and men are working together; when civil society, government and the private sector join forces.³ This echoes the sentiment of 25 years ago, when Beijing was one of the first big UN events with major participation from civil society organizations.

Angela Merkel was, however, not the only high ranking German woman speaking at the event. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and former Federal Minister of Defense in Germany, also emphasized in her opening of the plenary segment that action and commitment are needed to achieve the goals set out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago.

She elaborated the gender equality strategy of the EU for the next five years which has three main pillars: first, the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls; second, the advancement and empowerment of women, both already key points in the Beijing Declaration; third, achieving equal pay. The latter commitment has been in the EU treaty since 1957, however, there still remains a 16% pay gap in the EU between men and women.⁴

Even though 14 of the top 20 countries of gender equality are part of the EU, no country – in the EU and worldwide – has achieved full gender equality. Worryingly, in several states worldwide, a clear attack on women's rights as well as curtailing of already achieved rights is happening.⁵

Looking at Iceland, the top performing country worldwide in gender equality for the 11th time this year,⁶ could provide an idea of where the rest of the world should head to.

Iceland's Prime Minister acknowledged the gains made worldwide over the past 25 years, but also stated clearly that "in some areas, progress is unacceptably slow and there are increased efforts to roll back progress especially on women's reproductive rights and freedoms",⁷ and expressed concern over the politicization of women's rights.

She pointed out that having gender equality enshrined in laws is due to past generations, and implementing these laws is what we need to do today, as we owe it to future generations. This is especially poignant in the anniversary year of the UN, the Beijing declaration and 10 years of UNWOMEN.

Iceland's Prime Minister also warned that COVID-19 has a more severe impact on women and that it enables states to curtail women's rights, increases inequality and gender-based violence as well as extreme poverty amongst women. During the rebuilding and restructuring of society, she wants to see gender and racial equality as well as democracy and social justice at the forefront, a seeming nudge at the United States.

The United States used their statement to highlight the gains American women have made in political, economic, social leadership positions as well as the role America plays in protecting and advancing the rights of women around the world.

The US then went on to chastise "evil regimes that deny them (women) and all their people god given fundamental freedoms and basic human dignity"⁸ and blamed those regimes to have a negative impact on women's lives beyond their borders. To ensure that there was no doubt who these regimes could be, the statement singled out Venezuela, supported by Cuba, and Iran, whose "hidden hand" causes suffering to women in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. This was not so much a nudge, as a point blank shot.

The worst perpetrator in the US' view, however, is the host of the 4th World Conference on Women, China – with help from UN agencies.⁹

25 years ago, UN Member States projected, with some hope, that China would be integrated in the liberal world order and adhere to the Human Rights Declaration. This year, Member States evoked these points and pointed again to the shortcomings of China.

China, as the host of the conference which is being celebrated, spoke as part of the opening segment. After honoring women who worked on the COVID-19 response, Xi Jinping promised nationwide measures to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on women and ensured that the rights of women and girls are placed high up on the agenda of public health and the economic reopening of the country. Additionally, the statement mentioned that China would create new opportunities in this period for women to participate in decision-making and be more involved in national economic, cultural and social governance, making gender equality a social norm and a moral imperative observed by all.

China also called for more cooperation for women's development globally and urged the UN to do more to eliminate gender-based violence, as well as discrimination and poverty of women. New challenges, such as bridging the gender digital divide should be addressed with new solutions to make women-related targets an early harvest result for the UN and its 2030 Agenda.

Furthermore, China supported more gender equality within UN agencies and committed to donate 10 mil USD over the next five years to UNWOMEN. Equally it will continue to sponsor the UNESCO prize for women and girls education.¹⁰ The engagement with and support of UN processes stands in direct contrast to the US' sentiment and shows once more how China is using, and creating, opportunities to increase its clout in the UN as the US purposefully attacks and damages the institution.

At a time when China and the US use every opportunity and platform at the UN to further their national interests, what does the UN itself have to say on gender equality?

In his opening statement, the Secretary General António Guterres paid tribute to the Beijing Conference and highlighted that women's rights are the basis for equality and justice worldwide. He voiced concern that these rights were often ignored and violated. The recent pushback on gender equality and women rights in all corners of the world provoked him to state that "now is the time to push back against the pushback."¹¹

Child marriage incidence is still high for girls; femicide is still happening all over the world and is often committed by current or former husbands or boyfriends.¹² Here he mentioned the positive cooperation with the EU on the "[Spotlight Initiative](#)" to eliminate violence against women and girls. Additionally, Guterres noted that women are still excluded from decision-making roles where the abovementioned issues could be changed, be it in peace negotiations or climate talks.

The lack of women leadership is also reflected in the COVID-19-pandemic as men occupy 70% of leadership roles in healthcare, however, women are most impacted by the effects of the pandemic. Therefore, this could increase the regress of the fragile progress that has been made since the Beijing conference. The recovery and rebuilding efforts without doubt need to put women at the center.

To improve the lack of opportunities for female leadership and to increase the number of women in boardrooms, at peace negotiations and all other places where decisions are made that affect their lives, affirmative actions and quotas are needed. Hence, the UN has introduced a Gender Parity Strategy in 2017. This has led to the UN achieving gender parity in its leadership at beginning of 2020 with 90 men and 90 women as full time senior leaders, and advocates working for parity on all levels.

At a time when progress for gender parity has been achieved in the top echelons of the United Nations, how far away is the rest of the world though?

The website of Global Gender Gap Report 2020 by the World Economic Forum states soberingly "[N]one of us will see gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor likely will many of our children."¹³ Since 2018, the gender gap has been reduced by 0.6 percentage points and when everything stays the same, the overall global gender gap can only be closed in 99.5 years. This however, does not yet take the impacts of COVID-19 into account.

The report covers 153 countries and investigates four issues: Economic participation, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. No country has achieved full gender parity, with Iceland coming the furthest by closing 82% of its gap. Yemen, Iraq and Pakistan are trailing the list.

The biggest gap exists in political empowerment, as only a few countries have closed 50% of the gap. This shows the severe under-representation of women in politics. In the 153 countries covered by the index, only 25% of the total of 35.127 parliamentary seats are occupied by women. In as many as 45 of the 153 countries, women take less than 20% of the seats available and a couple of countries have no female parliamentarians at all (e.g. Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea).

The higher up the political ladder one looks, the fewer women one finds. In the 153 countries, only 21% of the 3,343 ministers are women, and there are currently 32 countries where women hold less than 10% of positions on ministerial level. Among these countries, ten do not have women ministers at all. Furthermore, looking at the head of states over the past 50 years, 85 of the 153 countries have not had a woman in that position. This accounts for 56% of the countries covered and includes emerging and advanced economies such as Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and the United States.¹⁴

Women remain largely absent from policy and decision making roles, although they are most affected by them, as the COVID-19-pandemic has highlighted once again. Certainly, waiting for another 25 years to implement the Beijing declaration is something we cannot explain in

good faith to the next generation of women and girls.

Serious action needs to be taken now and has to move beyond another round of well-meant declarations.

¹ <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950907212825.txt>

² <http://webtv.un.org/search/part-2-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196650615001/?term=2020-10-01&sort=date>

³ <http://webtv.un.org/search/part-2-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196650615001/?term=2020-10-01&sort=date>

⁴ <http://webtv.un.org/watch/part-1-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196610024001/?term=>

⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

⁷ <http://webtv.un.org/search/part-2-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196650615001/?term=2020-10-01&sort=date>

⁸ <http://webtv.un.org/search/continuation-of-statements-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6197774152001/?term=High-level%20Meeting%20to%20Celebrate%2025th%20Anniversary%20of%20Beijing%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Conference&sort=date&page=3>

⁹ <http://webtv.un.org/search/continuation-of-statements-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6197774152001/?term=High-level%20Meeting%20to%20Celebrate%2025th%20Anniversary%20of%20Beijing%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Conference&sort=date&page=3>

¹⁰ <http://webtv.un.org/watch/part-1-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196610024001/?term=>

¹¹ <http://webtv.un.org/watch/part-1-general-assembly-high-level-meeting-on-the-twenty-fifth-anniversary-of-the-fourth-world-conference-on-women-beijing-25/6196610024001/?term=>

¹² https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/WHO_RHR_12.38_eng.pdf;jsessionid=E18A8F19D70AE4C852BD6CB7BFF06581?sequence=1

¹³ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>

¹⁴ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

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