**Achievements and Challenges 20 Years after Beijing: A View from Switzerland**

Flurina Derungs, Ursula Keller

**Abstract**

This publication is part of the Think Piece Series *Let's Talk about Women's Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action*. In this series, leading feminist thinkers discuss achievements in the field of women's rights and gender equality; identify the challenges faced in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action; and consider ways of moving forward. They offer both critical insights and highlight opportunities for realizing women's rights after 2015. Please share your thoughts on this article in the comments space below.

**The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago.**

While achieving many milestones is a cause for celebration, much remains to be done. In the space below, we will highlight the achievements of the Beijing Platform for Action as well as reflect on the challenge of closing the gender gap.

**Introduction**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing/20) was adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, China. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) is a visionary, broad and pioneering platform containing objectives in 12 critical areas of concern—poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic empowerment, environment, human rights, media, and the girl-child. This study is a participatory review and evaluation carried out in 2014 by the University of Bern on mandate of the Swiss Confederation, including the views of government, civil society, specialized gender equality agencies and other experts, with the additional insight achieved through achievements, challenges and ways forward. This article is a contribution to the recent publication *Let's Talk about Women's Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action*.

**International Conference and Summit**

The Beijing Platform for Action outlines a firm political agenda for moving towards gender equality in every country. It outlined a set of objectives for women and men in the social, political, economic, cultural and family spheres, which was presented in 1995 at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) is a visionary, broad and pioneering platform containing objectives in 12 critical areas of concern—poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic empowerment, environment, human rights, media, and the girl-child. Let us look at some of the key findings.

**Remarkable progress, but many challenges remain**

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**Achievements**

International conferences and summits are as good and sustainable as their concrete implementation," said Ruth Dreifuss, former Minister of Home Affairs and head of the Swiss delegation to Beijing, when launching the Swiss Action Plan for promoting gender equality in 1999. The Action Plan outlines how the promises made in Beijing: it contains 287 actions to implement the BPfA in all 12 critical areas of concern—poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic empowerment, environment, human rights, media, and the girl-child. Actions relate to home affairs as well as foreign policy and international cooperation. Based on an approach that aims to mainstream gender, the Swiss Action Plan also addresses the roles of different actors in implementing the required actions.

In the run-up to Beijing+20 countries around the world have reviewed their progress and achievements, in the process identifying the challenges that remain for full equality of women and men to become reality. So where do we stand today in Switzerland regarding the promises made in Beijing, and in the Swiss Action Plan? A participatory review and evaluation carried out in 2014 by the University of Bern on mandate of the Swiss Confederation, including the views of government, civil society, specialized gender equality agencies and other experts, has provided rich insights into achievements, challenges and ways forward. This article is a contribution to the recent publication *Let's Talk about Women's Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action*.

**Reconceptualising family responsibilities and employment outside the home**

Beijing outlined the legal equality of men and women. It proscribes discrimination on the basis of sex and promotes gender equality de jure and de facto in the workplace. Women are entering the labour market in increasing numbers: today six out of ten women are employed. But women’s employment differs significantly from men’s. Part-time work is typical, with eight out of ten employed women with children under 15 working part-time, whereas only one out of ten men does so. This results in women being overrepresented in lower paid, flexible and precarious positions. Even if guaranteed by contract, women in the private sector still earn 18.5% less than men on average. While education level or position can explain some of this difference, 6.7% is due to wage discrimination summing up in a shortfall in women’s earning of 7.7 billion Swiss francs (CHF) a year. In other words, structural discrimination persists in the Swiss economy and workplace. Logically, the software developed by the federal office for equal opportunities provides a tool for employers to check their remuneration policy and to prove equal pay when arguing for pay discrimination.

Since the adoption of the Swiss Action Plan, women’s education level has increased. Whereas 13.6% of women held a university degree in 1999, 30.2% did in 2012. This increase is realised by horizontal and vertical segregation that persists in education and employment. While women are more present in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Moreover, the higher the career level, the fewer the number of women. Among all employees in management positions only a third are women; in the 100 biggest companies women represent only 13% of board members; and just 3% of CEOs are women. Rigid gender stereotypes are still embedded in the views of government, civil society, specialized gender equality agencies and other experts, with the additional insight achieved through achievements, challenges and ways forward. This article is a contribution to the recent publication *Let's Talk about Women's Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action*.

**Women’s equal representation in political decision making**

Remarkable progress, but many challenges remain

Women’s equal representation in political decision making is as hard to tackle as their representation in the economy. A continuous increase of women in parliament that began with women’s suffrage in 1971 came to a halt in 2007 and subsequently decreased. At cantonal and city levels, women do not make up more than one third of parliamentarians. At the national level the proportion is closer to one in four. Beijing recognised the importance of full equality of women and men in the public sphere—be it in the political, social, economic or family contexts. The Beijing Platform for Action outlines how the promises made in Beijing: it contains 287 actions to implement the BPfA in all 12 critical areas of concern—poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic empowerment, environment, human rights, media, and the girl-child. Actions relate to home affairs as well as foreign policy and international cooperation. Based on an approach that aims to mainstream gender, the Swiss Action Plan also addresses the roles of different actors in implementing the required actions.

**Concentrating on national priorities and the need for concrete implementation**

Women have the right to 14 weeks of leave paid at 80% of their salary, paid parental (i.e., paternity) leave is still not available. Since the implementation in 2003 of an incentive programme to fund childcare facilities, public acceptance has improved and about 50,000 new places have been created. This has also significantly improved the possibilities for women and men to reconcile employment and family duties. Despite these changes, the supply of public childcare remains very modest in international comparison. Full-time places are available for only 11% of all children of pre-school-age and for 8% of school-age children. Strikingly, many regions lack any form of public childcare facilities. Furthermore, costs for public childcare—compared with other countries—are very high, well-setting incentives for parents for not increasing their paid employment. Elderly care also remains a significant challenge, in particular as demographic shifts coupled with public pension reforms decrease the number of elderly parents. In other words, structural discrimination persists in the Swiss economy and workplace. Logically, the software developed by the federal office for equal opportunities provides a tool for employers to check their remuneration policy and to prove equal pay when arguing for pay discrimination.

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Governance Environment Participation Social protection Americas State Rural development Taxation Institutional framework Middle East and North development Sustainable Development Goals Humanitarian assistance Care Extractive industries Labour Green economy Public-private partnerships Gender Europe Human rights

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