

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

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Authors: [Flurina Derungs](#), [Ursula Keller](#)

This contribution is published as 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." 1 Despite being one of the world's wealthiest countries and most modern economies, in Switzerland gender equality remains an elusive challenge. Paid maternity leave, legal abortion and an increase in women's educational attainment are some of the milestones achieved since 1995, when the country was one of 189 states to adopt the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women. But while legal gender equality may be nearly achieved, much remains to be done to achieve gender equality in practice. Rigid gender stereotypes, wage discrimination, women's heavy care burden, segregation in the workplace, violence against women, under-representation of women in political and economic decision making, and structural obstacles to reconciling family duties with employment still stand in the way of gender equality. In order to realize gender equality, government, employers, politicians and civil society all need to take concrete and coordinated actions. These range from changes in the educational sector, in the labour market and in the social security system to an

active foreign policy that promotes women's human rights.

Flurina Derungs is head of Transdisciplinary Research at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (ICFG) at the University of Bern.

Ursula Keller is the Senior Gender Policy Advisor of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) / Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, 189 states adopted the **Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (BPfA)**. This visionary, broad and pioneering platform contains objectives in 12 critical areas of concern and guides states in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

"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 illustrates how seriously Switzerland takes 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, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment 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 are reviewing their progress and achievements in implementing the Beijing commitments, and 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. Let us have a look at some of the key findings.

Remarkable progress, but many challenges remain

The Beijing Platform for Action found a fertile environment in Switzerland in 1995, with a favourable **political context for promoting gender equality** after historically slow progress. Switzerland accepted women's suffrage in 1971, for example, and only in 1981 did women and men obtain equal rights in the Swiss constitution. But a range of long-overdue milestones were achieved subsequently. In 1985 the legal recognition of only males as heads of households was replaced by equal partnership in marriage. Under the influence of a strong women's movement, specialized agencies for promoting gender equality were established (mainly) between 1985 and 1995. A social democrat and women's activist, Ruth Dreifuss headed the Federal Department of Home Affairs between 1993 and 2002. And Switzerland ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997.

In 1996 Switzerland introduced the federal law on equality of women and men. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and promotes **gender equality de jure and de facto in the workplace**. Since then around 800 legal cases have been brought against unequal remuneration, sexual harassment or other discrimination 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 constitution and law, in 2012 women in the private sector still earned 18.9% less than men on average. While education level or position can explain some of this difference, 8.7% 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. Logib, software developed by the federal office for equal opportunity, provides a tool for employers to check their remuneration policy and to prove equal pay when applying for public procurement.

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 relativized by **horizontal and vertical segregation** that persists in education and employment. Women mainly choose professions in the fields of education, the arts and social sciences; men 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 at play.

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 parliamentary representatives; at the national level the proportion is closer to one fourth.

Reconciling family responsibilities and employment outside the home is key to achieving gender equality in every country. In Switzerland a public referendum finally introduced **paid maternity leave** in 2004, after more than 60 years of struggle. While women now 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 increased and about 50,000 new places have been created. This has also significantly improved the possibility 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 still lack any form of public childcare facilities. Furthermore, costs for public childcare—compared with other countries—are very high, setting wrong incentives for parents for not increasing their paid employment. **Elderly care** also remains a significant challenge, in particular as demographic shifts coupled with public austerity measures increase pressure on this crucial (paid and unpaid) work that is mainly done by women. Although men are taking on more responsibility for **care work**, the majority of work in the family is still done by women: in Switzerland it is estimated that 2.8 billion working hours a year are devoted to care of children and adults, and that 80% of this work is unpaid. This unpaid care work amounts to over 80 billion CHF per year if paid at market rates.

Important steps have been taken in regard to **social security**. Improvements enhanced the economic situation of (care-giving) women, who can now receive individual retirement pensions. The retirement pension balance can be split between the two partners in case of divorce, and furthermore, credits can be granted for (non-remunerated) care-giving. However, due to the still rigid structures of the social and economic setting as well as remaining legal inequalities, women and the children living with them face severe challenges and increased risk of poverty in case of separation and divorce.

2002 brought an important milestone concerning **sexual and reproductive health and rights** and women's bodily autonomy—a long-term central claim of the women's movement. Nearly 75% of those who voted in the public referendum accepted the right to legal abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

An important shift has also been achieved in the public perception of **domestic violence**—from a private matter to a public one. After the introduction of new domestic violence legislation in 2004 and 2007, women no longer had to report their violating partners and leave their homes to be safe. Rather, it became the duty of the state to prosecute violence and remove the perpetrators. With the signing of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2013, Switzerland confirmed its intention to prevent violence, protect victims and punish perpetrators. Violence in intimate relationships remains a severe challenge, however, with more than 7,000 offences registered by police in 2013. It is estimated that real numbers are much higher, with 20-40% of all women experiencing violence in intimate relationships. This causes tangible public costs of CHF 146 million to 287 million per year for police and judiciary, loss of productivity and support services.

Finally, Switzerland has intensified its **foreign engagement in promoting women's human rights** in both multilateral and bilateral forums. Examples include the adoption of a gender mainstreaming policy in development cooperation, and the elaboration of a national action plan on women, peace and security. With respect to the post-2015 development agenda, Switzerland advocates for a stand-alone goal as well as cross-cutting integration of gender-sensitive targets and indicators in other goals.

Further action is needed

Twenty years after Beijing, the claims of the Platform for Action have lost none of their visionary power or necessity. The facts and figures described above show both that much has been achieved in Switzerland, and that many challenges remain to full achievement of the commitments made in Beijing.

While around Beijing there were many factors favourable for promoting gender equality, the **historical and political context changed** later on. The stagnation of women's increase in political decision making went together with the strengthening of Right-wing parties (with low representation of women). Specialized agencies for promoting gender equality faced growing pressure and cuts in resources; some even had to close. In international comparison, Switzerland today is characterized by a resistance of the state in family and equality politics—this repeatedly being confirmed through public votes. Much is left to individual responsibility, and the quality of the solutions and arrangements often depend on income and social status.

The participative review process of the Swiss Action Plan in 2014 identified the following areas for further action:

- Switzerland needs a **national programme on promoting gender equality** engaging all stakeholders, including government on all levels and civil society. This programme must be rooted in human rights standards and equipped with adequate and sustainable financial and human resources.
- As a basis for all action, more gender-specific **research** as well as research with a gender perspective is necessary. **Monitoring of progress** needs to be based on sex-disaggregated data and a robust accountability system.
- In order to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, including gender stereotypes, **education** is key. Parents, teachers, pre-school staff and trainers play a key role in gender-just education and change in gender-typical career choices.
- The labour market must promote **economic independence of women and men**. The main issues here are decent work, fighting wage discrimination and promoting the reconciliation of employment with care duties.
- The **social security system** also needs to adjust to changed realities and biographies. Better social protection of care work, actions against wrong incentives, individual taxation and special measures to absorb the risk of poverty are needed. Special attention must be paid to **multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination**.
- Health** and its link with gender equality need to be placed at the centre of gender equality activities.
- The fight to prevent **gender-based violence**, and to support and protect victims, must continue and intensify.
- Action is also needed to ensure full and **equal participation and leadership of women in decision making** at all levels and in the political as well as economic sphere.
- Finally yet importantly, Switzerland needs an **active foreign policy in promoting women's human rights**. This means both strengthening gender mainstreaming policies in foreign policy and in international cooperation, and also promoting specialized and gender-specific activities and programmes to target root causes of discrimination. Therein the aspect of care-work needs to be considered and addressed as a crosscutting issue.

FOOTNOTE

¹ Co-chairpersons' Conclusions, *Beijing+20 Regional Review Meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 6–7 November 2014, Geneva*

REFERENCES

- The Swiss Action Plan, its evaluation as well as the Swiss Beijing+20 report—and a wealth of other information on gender equality in Switzerland—can be found on [the website of the Swiss Gender Equality Office](#) (in German and French).

- Swiss data and statistics cited in this article can be found on [the website of the Federal Office for Statistics](#).
- Information on the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women on Beijing+20, together with information on the Regional Review Meetings and the national and regional review reports on Beijing+20, can be found on [the CSW website](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Flurina Derungs works at the [Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies \(ICFG\)](#) at the University of Bern. She is head of [Transdisciplinary Research](#) and conducts applied research at the interface of science, politics and practice in the field of gender and development as well as on gender equality in Switzerland. Together with her team, Flurina was responsible for the [Swiss Beijing+20 Review](#) as well as the [Evaluation of the Swiss Beijing Action Plan](#). As an academic expert, she is part of the Swiss delegation at the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2015 on Beijing+20. Flurina holds a Master's degree in Social Work and Social Policy from the University of Fribourg and has worked to promote gender equality at the national and international levels, as a gender equality delegate of a Swiss canton and in gender-based violence prevention in East Africa.

Ursula Keller is the Senior Gender Policy Advisor of the [Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation \(SDC\)](#) / [Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs](#). In her function, she provides guidance and support to Headquarter and Field Offices for the implementation of SDC's gender policy and leads the global network of SDC's gender focal points. Ursula is an expert in gender and women's rights in development and peace-building contexts, and has worked in the Middle East and in Africa. Prior positions have included project director at the [Center for Peace-building at Swisspeace](#), and work for [cfd](#), a feminist peace organization working in development cooperation and peace and migration policies. She holds a Master' degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Zurich.

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Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Switzerlandinfo@unrisd.org
Tel: +41 (0)22 917 3060
Fax: + 41 (0)22 917 0650