



AN OPPORTUNITY FOR (R)EVOLUTION

20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action

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Anniversaries provide an opportunity for remembrance and stocktaking. The 20th anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is no exception to that rule. So far, evaluation documents have principally expressed frustration at the slow, uneven and limited achievements since then. But it should not be forgotten that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is still a powerful and inspirational text. With its historic legacy, it can contribute to the reframing of the progressive ideological debate and turn this anniversary into a celebration. This policy brief analyses this unique historic opportunity.

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Anniversaries provide an opportunity for remembrance and stocktaking. The 20th anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is no exception to that rule. Indeed, the [Fourth World Conference on Women](#), which took place in Beijing in 1995, was a game changer for gender equality. The event was strongly influenced by grassroots feminist movements and their demands, which led to the establishment of an inspiring, progressive document to advance this cause. This was the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), a comprehensive framework for transformation with strategic objectives and commitments under twelve critical areas of concern. This event brought together the different stakeholders in such large numbers for the first time ever. It has been an important, symbolic link, a unifying force between diverse feminist movements from different continents, from various backgrounds and with diverging objectives.

Just like the current generation of young adults, the Declaration was born at a time of a uniquely positive historical momentum. It was ambitious and its text reflects the belief that equality will soon prevail in society, it is merely a question of implementing the Platform for Action's policy proposals. And like the Millennial generation, 20 years later, the Beijing process currently seems to be faced with challenges that previous generations believed would no longer be a matter of concern.

The evaluation documents echo this pessimism. The European Parliament's study "[Evaluation of the Beijing Platform for Action +20 and the opportunities for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda](#)" states that the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action remains "*slow, uneven and limited*", while the process is underresourced and suffer from a lack of political will. Educational success, reflected in the increasing number of women in tertiary education and the fact that in Europe they now account for more than 50% of higher education students, does not translate in other areas. Generation after generation of feminists succeed each other but progress has been stalled. This has inevitably led to frustration.

This has not been the only reason for disappointment, however. With Beijing growing into an institutionalised process, it has become increasingly difficult for newcomers in the feminist movements and civil society organisations to join the discussions, shape the political process and put forward their claims. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the global intergovernmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality, asserts that the active participation of non-governmental organisations is a critical element in its work. Yet becoming part of the circle of accredited NGOs is an extremely selective process, with the result that the majority of feminist voices are lost. Indeed, progressive thoughts and initiatives often come from feminist groups that may not have an established organisation or legal entity, but they are the first ones to be confronted with local gender equality issues. Finding solutions to these challenges cannot wait, hence these groups and movements work with creativity and innovation to find answers. But due to their organisational nature and often lacking financial resources, these initiatives only reach the international level sporadically.

There are many examples of the exclusive nature of the current Beijing process. Recently, UN Women convened a [meeting](#) with leading thinkers from civil society with the aim of discussing key priorities for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, this meeting only included 50 representatives of global, regional and national civil society organisations, which can hardly be considered a representative group. This approach makes it difficult to mobilise the massive bottom up support that the Beijing process would need for its revitalisation. On the contrary, it creates division, fragmentation and competition instead of comprehensive dialogue.

With this challenge in mind, and on the occasion of this important Beijing anniversary, FEPS launched a video initiative entitled “[Passing on the torch: The legacy of the Beijing Platform for Action and new, grassroots feminist movements](#)” to reach out to current grassroots feminist movements, and ask them about their relation to the process and their current demands for global leaders. The experience was extremely illuminative and inspiring and shed light on the different layers of challenges ahead. The following paragraphs give an insight into the main findings of the initiative.

Gender politics, gender policies

Frustration around the Beijing Platform for Action, its low awareness and increasing distance from grassroots feminist movements should be viewed within the larger framework of current societal and political challenges. This trend fits the increasing disengagement of citizens from the political system and the quest for a new political frame after the financial and economic crisis. Both from the far right and the far left, we are witnessing a challenging of the human rights political framework. As pointed out in the book “[Gender as symbolic glue](#)” published by FEPS and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Budapest office, the insurgence of anti-gender movements should not be interpreted as a sign of mere backlash, but rather as a symptom of testing the limits of an alternative, exclusionary ideological and political frame.

For anti-gender movements, Beijing has been a successful field for ideological battle. Their presence has created such a fear among progressives that the document could be watered down that they prefer to block the possibility of organising a new, Fifth World Conference on Women. Instead of gearing up for this ideological challenge, policy review has followed policy review and policy pledges are put forward. However, one of the most important conclusions of the Beijing process is that there has been too much focus on legal commitment. The past 20 years have showed that legislative change can support societal change, but it cannot transform society. At the recent [Global Leaders’ Meeting on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment](#) 80 governments committed to close the gender gap by 2030. But given the stalled progress, can this pledge be perceived as a realistic and feasible one? Under these circumstances, disillusionment in younger generations is inevitable, while more experienced feminists wonder why their young counterparts do not join the institutional debate.

A new, inclusive ideological frame can be built on vision and hope, but not on fear of changing the rules of the neoliberal system. Now is the time perhaps to look at a Fifth World Conference on Women as an opportunity for progressives. It could help to reframe the debate and break away from the image of being part of the establishment. The challenge ahead would be immense, as

preparation for the event would require critical thinking about our approach to social justice, human rights and in particular gender equality. How is the notion of (formal) equality is currently misused? When can affirmative action be justified? What needs to be done to go beyond the binary language of equality between women and men? These are just a few issues that will need clarification.

Remembering the Beijing legacy

Twenty years after its adoption, some claim that the Beijing Declaration has lost support because it has simply become outdated. The FEPS video testimonies acknowledge the idea that the Declaration should be updated to remain a visionary guide to gender equality.

But it would be a mistake to frame the debate only as a matter of simple text updating. The major dilemma to be tackled is: if the failures of the neoliberal emancipation project have led to the questioning of the whole validity of the Beijing process, should we put it aside as a symbol of the past that led to the current crisis? Is defending the Beijing process by definition a defence of the neoliberal consensus?

We should not forget that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is still a powerful and inspirational text. Many participants in the video message initiative who were not or not fully aware of this process were surprised that such a progressive document could have been drafted, accepted and supported in 1995. Its strength lies not merely in the ambitious legal framework that codified and set a written structure for the demands of second wave feminists, allowing for measuring and monitoring improvement in women's rights and gender equality. Beijing can contribute to the creation of a re-enchanting progressive political language with its historical legacy through the inspiring stories of participants about the positive atmosphere and about the cathartic, unifying moment that strengthened the feminist movement.

One of today's tasks, therefore, should be to foster dialogue among different generations of feminists and the passing on of the Beijing progressive legacy. It would be wrong to put such an inspirational momentum completely aside due to subsequent tactical and implementation failures. These failures can serve as a lesson for young feminists and can help guide the reframing of the political debate on gender equality. Over the years, sadly, Hillary Clinton's declaration that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights" has become an empty motto. In current times when the universality of human rights is questioned by alternative political narratives, it is crucial that progressives show that this quote is inclusive: feminism is about an encompassing societal emancipation, for all groups within society.

Embracing grassroots feminist movements

Awareness among grassroots feminist movements about the Beijing Platform for Action and the procedures through which it can be shaped is currently very low within the political debate on gender equality, with the exception perhaps of NGO forums and consultation processes. Interviews conducted by FEPS show that many young feminists have never heard about the Beijing Platform for Action. Even if they have heard about it, they do not know how to engage with these processes,



which have become more and more complex and difficult to negotiate. Or even worse, due to past negative experiences with difficulties in getting their message heard, they just don't see the importance of a dialogue. Only those organisations that know how to work within the system and agree to do so can be part of the process. This leads to a vicious circle, where critical voices do not reach the Beijing process, which in turn makes inclusive transformation almost impossible.

It is a myth that progressive young adults are not interested in gender issues anymore. Indeed, the [Millennial Dialogue Survey](#) conducted by FEPS, the Center for American Progress and Generation Progress, found that *“(e)qual rights are close to the hearts of this generation, as is the willingness to embrace a wider array of gender identities and sexual orientations.”* Thanks to social media, we have been witnessing a strong increase in the number of feminist organisations, movements and initiatives. They are there in large numbers, they are active and often transnationally connected, but their disappointment with politics and institutions means that they are active outside of the Beijing frame.

This transformation of course does not simply translate as cherry picking some young individuals representing new feminist NGOs. In recent years, there has been a particular focus on including and inspiring young women in the yearly Commission on the Status of Women, but only as tokens of individual achievement and success. In many cases it is young, successful women in business and politics, who made it on their own to the top, who are put forward to speak. This choice demonstrates well the core ideological issue surrounding the process. After having been at the forefront of feminist unity and sisterhood, it has adopted a neoliberal approach.

Opening up means a return to the origins of Beijing, embracing the grassroots feminist movements. With the new and constantly increasing possibilities for online communication, dialogue can be easily facilitated even for those groups and movements who lack the financial means to be physically present. Given the negative experiences of recent years, simply reaching out might not be welcomed with great enthusiasm at first, some suspicion will be inevitable. Therefore, it is crucial that this dialogue goes beyond setting up more channels of communication. The Beijing process has to include new demands. For that, there is a need to better understand these new, grassroots feminist movements. What was their point of emergence? For whose rights do they stand? In what way would they prefer to contribute to the process?

The Beijing process has then deliver on its promises. The cause for disillusionment is not simply because achieving gender equality has proven to be much slower than expected. It is rather the lack of political will to change the power structures that led to frustration. But by raising the awareness within broader society about both remaining and new issues of gender equality and by taking on board the new claims of the current generation of feminists, Beijing has an immense potential for relaunch and to be at the forefront of an ambitious feminist movement.

Cause for celebration

Anniversaries are an occasion for celebration. To turn the 20th anniversary of Beijing into such a celebration, progressive politicians have a historical responsibility to grasp again the unique opportunity now offered to them. In the FEPS – FES Budapest policy brief [“Beyond gender? Anti-](#)



[gender mobilization and lessons for progressives](#)”, some lessons and points for considerations were put forward. The interviews and exchanges that were conducted in the framework of the video initiative “Passing on the torch: The legacy of the Beijing Platform for Action and new, grassroots feminist movements” uphold these points and go one step further: in terms of progressive strategy, the transformation of the Beijing process could be at the forefront of this rerouting. The anniversary year will end soon, and while an exclusive political narrative is gaining larger and larger terrain, opting out on this occasion would be a disastrous loss of opportunity for progressives.