

Beijing+25 - NGO Report

The Red Elephant Foundation

In the 25 years that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) has existed, there have been many advancements and many areas still left awaiting improvement. We respond to this call for inputs from Civil Society Organizations as an organization enjoying Special Consultative Status with the UNECOSOC under the UNDESA. We are a civilian peacebuilding initiative using peace education to build gender equal and non-violent futures. Our inputs in response to this call for CSO views are informed entirely by our experience as activists and educators on the ground. In order for clarity, we have presented our views in the form of a simple list with subheadings for easy access and recall.

Dismantling the heteronormative lens

The key basis for any change in the BDPfA is the current state of global affairs. The BDPfA came about in response to structural and overt discrimination against women at the material time - which is specifically underscored by the Cold War and the post-World War II institutional arrangements (which have also evolved today). That the BDPfA was a fillip for the mobilization of women represents its path-breaking impact.

As Cornwall and Edwards (2015: 1) explained, Beijing came to “symbolize a rallying call for feminist activities, used to mark out certain lines of argument or kinds of actors.” The BDPfA emphasizes on the advancement of the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere (3), and that “local, national, regional, and global peace is attainable and is inextricably linked with the advancement of women who are a fundamental force for leadership, conflict resolution, and the promotion of lasting peace at all levels” (18). In the process, a certain measure of strategic essentialism operated (Spivak, 1988), as well as a heteronormative approach to the idea of “women” as well as the inclusion of “sexual orientation” as an identity factor within the BDPfA (Girard 2007).

The focus of the BDPfA is on cis gender women and heterosexual women. For the BDPfA to operate inclusively, it is vital to include trans women and queer women, as well as women of non-heterosexual orientations so as to address particular challenges they face. In its explicit recognition of the inequality between men and women, the BDPfA has binarized gender and conflated sex and gender (5). The conflation of “gender” and “women” as it equates gender to sex, though they are entirely different (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016; Charlesworth 1999) and ignores the truth that one can be targeted through generic violence for their sexual orientation (Moore and Barner 2017). In actioning this, segments of the declaration could include more inclusive language that takes into account other gender identities and sexual orientations, use a less heteronormative lens. For instance, in Chapter 1, the segment highlighted in bold font in the line “A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that **women and men can work together for themselves, for their children**” can be replaced with “the future generations.”

Transcending Essentialism and moving to intersectionality:

BDPfA should move beyond the scope of essentialism that equates women to mothers by affirming the scope of their health to their fertility (provision 17). By falling back into stereotypical constructions of what the scope of women’s health is, there is a clear demarcation of who can be a “woman,” to be included within the declaration. BDPfA excludes women who do not conform to the image of a cis-het woman - the emphasis on fertility and reproduction isolates bodies that identify as women by gender but may not be able to give birth by sex. Instead, it could expressly address better

access to mental health services/psycho-social support for survivors of gender-based violence, focus on raising awareness and normalizing menstrual hygiene and making menstrual products more accessible, and address transitioning in gender to acknowledge the fluidity of identities and dismantle heteronormativity and binaries of gender. The twelve areas within the BDPfA center on women and poverty, education, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and media, women and the environment, and the girl child. Even as these twelve areas are comprehensive and expansionary, it is necessary that the scope of the provisions under these areas be expanded to speak to structures that are in place currently. In addressing women and health, it is important to acknowledge particular challenges such as reproductive and sexual health, as well as the right to transition for a person ascribed male at birth. Furthermore, under (18), there is re-sexing of gender in that it treats women as either victims or as part of the peace process because of their inherent qualities that are largely confined to their sex assigned at birth as women. It tends to limit women's inclusion in peace processes as a function of their "inherently" peaceful and nurturing nature, thereby making them better equipped for peacekeeping (Whitworth 2004: 126). It is important to acknowledge intersectionality and bring forth voices that represents multiple stakeholders from different identity backgrounds and contexts that render their gender experiences unique.

Rethinking goals and their measurement

Much of the language of the BDPfA is centered on equality rather than equity – and emphasizing on making things more accessible so that everyone can benefit can be a far more wholesome solution toward building gender equal worlds. The BDPfA does not seem to articulate goals that can be measured. A second flaw is that the idea of engaging women is limited to merely increasing the number of women in decision making positions. It is hard to achieve in many nations because doing so needs several other factors to be addressed - such as systemic and structural barriers and the lack of access to full public participation. Despite reservations for women to take office at various positions, the "quota" is either never filled or is appropriated by those that already have privilege.

Further, the BDPfA mentions that it is determined to encourage men to participate. A major challenge to this is the deep-rooted custom of recognising men as the "superior gender" or the prevalence of patriarchy. By emphasizing on wholesome education that includes gender sensitisation, the BDPfA can drive wholesome strategic change into fruition. The current spectrum of emphasis appears to be on prevention – but without direction.

Armed Conflict

Even as BDPfA addresses violence against women, it does not take a stand against war - which by itself, is an antithesis to feminist foreign policy. The BDPfA calls for the respect of international law and international humanitarian law toward the "protection" of women, without calling for demilitarization. In doing so, it normalizes the violence of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, as well as war and is busy attempting to make "war safer for women" (Shepherd 2016: 10). It does not condemn war and excludes room for "anti-militarist feminism" in advocating for international peace and security (Confortini 2012). The mere inclusion of women in peace processes does not automatically mean that women will be part of identifying and shaping what constitutes armed conflict and responses to armed conflict, as well as peace processes (Ni Aolain 2016: 276). While BDPfA does build a link between violence against women and girls and international security (Shepherd, 2008), it does not acknowledge the several structures that act as a barrier to the exercise of women's agency (Aroussi 2017).

Dismantling structures

The BDPfA does not acknowledge the adverse impacts of structures and structural violence against women. In doing so, it has failed to account for the role of historical, intergenerational, post-colonial, and post-Cold War (now) traumas that challenge women in the way in which they are treated. The reliance on structures to exclude and continue to keep discriminatory treatment against women alive remains one of the major systemic disadvantages that women face in engaging in and enjoying full access to public spaces and lives.

References

Aroussi, S. ed. (2017) *Rethinking National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security* (Vol. 135). IOS Press

Björkdahl, A. and Selimovic, M. (2016) 'Gender and transitional justice'. in *An Introduction to Transitional Justice*. ed. by Simic, O. London: Routledge.

Charlesworth, H. (1999) Feminist Methods in International Law. *American Journal of International Law* 93 (2), 379-394.

Confortini, C.C. (2012) *Intelligent Compassion: Feminist Critical Methodology in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Cornwall A. and Edwards, J. (2015) "Introduction: Beijing+20 - Where now for Gender Equality?" 46(4), 1-8.

Girard, F. (2007) Negotiating sexual rights and sexual orientation at the UN. SexPolitics: Reports from the Frontlines, Sexuality Policy Watch. Available online at www.sxpolitics.org/frontlines/home/index.php

McKay, S.R. and Winter, D.D., 1998. The United Nations' Platform for Action: Critique and Implications. *Peace and conflict*, 4(2), pp.167-178.

Moore, M.W. and Barner, J.R. (2017) Sexual minorities in conflict zones: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 35, 33-37

Ní Aoláin, F. (2016) 'The 'war on terror' and extremism: assessing the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda'. *International Affairs*, 92 (2), 275-291.

Shepherd, L.J. (2011) 'Sex, Security and Superhero(in)es: From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13, 504-521.

Spivak, G. (1988) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Nelson C. and Grossberg, L. London: Macmillan.

Whitworth, S. (2004) *Men, militarism, and UN peacekeeping: a gendered analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.