

# Wearing Platform Shoes: How the Platform for Action Changed our Lives, and how Women's Lives have Changed since the Platform for Action

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**Abstract** In this article the author reflects on her personal experience from being at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the study and work she has done since this time on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action through the United Nations, NGOs and her active role in the global women's movement. She looks at strategic ways the document could have been used in a policy context to lead global and national dialogue and draws from her PhD thesis titled 'Beijing – Transformation and Feminist Politics: From the Personal to the International'. She links the process of the Beijing conference and Platform for Action back to the accountability within the UN itself, identifying opportunities lost through lack of clear commitment, planning and resourcing. She concludes by highlighting the importance of this event and document on the lives of women who were a part of the process and the value of a future NGO Forum for women for the global women's movement.

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## 1 Introduction

'The success of Beijing is reflected in women's stories and anecdotes about their personal transformation.'  
*Beijing! UN Fourth World Conference on Women* by A. Anand and S. Gouri 1998: xxvii

In the past two decades, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) process has punctuated my life in a multitude of ways. Participating actively in the Beijing conference and NGO Forum in the knowledge that it was the largest gathering of (mostly) women ever staged, as a part of a global women's movement that interacts on the UN stage, has shaped me as the feminist development worker that I am. It has influenced the way I analyse issues as a feminist, how I organise on ideas as an activist, and the topics on which I choose to work.

For me, the Beijing process was a watershed. I came to realise after the conference that I was not the only one whose life had been changed by taking part in the conference. This personal journey had me questioning the way Beijing transformed women and the organisations they work in – from small-scale

feminist NGOs, to the large bureaucracy of the UN. For a decade this questioning informed my PhD thesis titled 'Beijing – Transformation and Global Feminist Politics: From the Personal to the International'. This thesis began as a study of how the issues articulated in the BPfA were shaped by feminists at the NGO Forum, and how this influenced, and was guided by, feminist academic and activist writing of the time. As with many struggling and opportunistic part-time PhD students, I tried to combine my work and study roles as much as possible, changing my chapters and thesis focus each time I changed my job. When I became a member of the Australian Council for Women,<sup>1</sup> I began to reflect more on the differences of how Australians were 'doing' the 'Beijing process' compared to other countries. When I left my position at the Australian Council for Overseas Aid and moved into a private consultancy firm, I used the BPfA as the basis for policy development for the organisation, and as a tool to guide the firm's gender and development plan and programming. At this stage, I started to write a chapter on the importance of the different actors – NGOs, governments, the UN and the private sector working together and using the BPfA in a socially responsible business

context. It seemed no matter which way I turned the platform heels I acquired from the Beijing process would always lead me to the right place in my gender journey. I felt like a feminist Dorothy with elevated soles, BPfA in hand as my compass to traverse the globe.

I worked extensively in Papua New Guinea (PNG) during the late 1990s, and used the opportunity to interview many women from PNG on their Beijing experiences and perceptions. I then moved to Vietnam to work for the UN in implementing the BPfA in a field office context (that was actually the job description). These experiences inspired new chapters on the UN at a field office level, government actors in a comparative analysis between Australia and Vietnam, and a separate chapter altogether on NGOs. The only chapters that survived the ever meandering path of my focus were to look at the power of NGOs and the women's movement as channels for change, and a case study of the UN.

There have been many papers that critique the national roles governments have played in the Beijing process, but it seemed at the time that very few were actually looking at the roll-out in the organisation that provided the architecture – the UN itself – and I was working in the shoe store! As it became my focus to 'implement' the BPfA in a UN country office for three years, I had a lot of time to consider the space, parameters and receptivity that the UN held for what I considered to be a powerful feminist transformatory process. I strapped on those platform heels and danced away.

## **2 Working in the shoe shop**

The BPfA focuses on 12 critical areas of concern: women and poverty; education; health; violence; peace and armed conflict; economics; decision-making; human rights; media; environment; the girl child; and mechanisms to advance the status of women. In articulating mechanisms for the UN to incorporate the document into its mandate and work it states in paragraph 307 of the BPfA:

The institutional capacity of the United Nations system to carry out and coordinate its responsibility for implementing the Platform for Action, as well as its expertise and working methods to promote the advancement of women, should be improved (UN 1995: para 307).

Later in 1995 the 50th session of the General Assembly endorsed the agreements of Beijing and proposed the document, *Implementation of the Outcome*

*of the Fourth World Conference on Women's Action for Equality, Development and Peace Report of the General Secretary (A/50/744)*. This report recommended: designating a senior official as adviser on gender issues; improving the collection and coordination of sex-disaggregated data; assigning resident coordinators to integrate gender at the national level of UN operations; increasing gender training and assessments; increasing accountability for gender mainstreaming in programmes and management systems; increasing monitoring of gender-related issues; and strengthening partnerships with NGOs on gender issues (Timothy 1997: 125).

The year after Beijing the Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (IACWGE)<sup>2</sup> was formed, which meets on an annual basis<sup>3</sup> and brings together gender focal-points from different agencies to discuss common strategies, review progress, and agree on new and collaborative work to implement the BPfA and mainstreaming gender (King 1998: 5). This provided the first formal mechanism for UN agencies to work jointly on gender and provided a network for UN internal reporting on the implementation of the BPfA.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Statement to the Commission on the Status of Women in 1998 identified a new plan of commitments and initiatives to follow up on the BPfA. These included a strengthening of policy, skills development of staff, increased funding (an additional US\$7.8 million for a global programme and \$1 million for a gender facility), increased use of sex-disaggregated data in analysis, increasing the role of women in management and a focus on women's rights as human rights (UNDP 1998: 1–3). This global programme funded the work of 21 UN Volunteers (UNVs) around the world to work jointly between UNVs/UNDP and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). I was one of these UNVs based in an office in Hanoi, and I was eager to draw from this mandate and worked diligently on gender mainstreaming, running gender training, setting up gender mainstreaming policy and accountability mechanisms and doing whatever was possible with lots of energy and commitment. With colleagues around the world, and some very impressive female role models from headquarters (who have remained an inspiration in the 20 years hence) we were able to create some incredible initiatives and eventually I got the opportunity to present these in a publication at a workshop in New York during the Beijing+5 Special Session. I am still incredibly proud of what we did as a team

of committed feminists, and we created a strong camaraderie, but it was the bureaucracy that created the context for Beijing that was in itself the barrier for implementing its own mandate. A lot of our teleconferences and email exchanges focused on the problems and not the possibilities, and in the end only a couple of us continued to work for the UN after the position finished.

UNDP exemplifies the challenges faced in mainstreaming gender. It has produced several commendable policy statements and publications on gender mainstreaming and has undertaken critical evaluations of its own practice (Kardam 1991; de Avelar 1998; Mondesire 1998). These studies have illustrated the lack of a coherent and comprehensive approach to gender mainstreaming and the low level of implementation of policies and programmes in the field (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002: 289), which is what we battled as UNVs.

### 2.1 Implementation challenges

The problems faced by UNDP were shared by other UN agencies and the IACWGE itself, which hampered its impact. In its fourth session in 1999,<sup>4</sup> the IACWGE addressed the issue of funding:

The Committee noted that its Secretariat, as well as its activities, is accommodated within the regular workload of its members. In several instances, projects are being implemented with the help of volunteers, or interns, and the Committee expresses its appreciation to them. Several of the Committee's activities however, have been delayed, or had to be postponed, because of lack of resources (IACWGE 1999: 5, para. 24).

The committee could not be expected to function effectively using existing staff time, interns and volunteers. Delays and postponements of the work plan illustrated that this was not a feasible approach. Thus, while the UN finally had a consolidated structure in place to address gender issues, and the policy to fit it, the resources were not available. The UN is a multi-billion dollar organisation that could find the funds to address gender issues adequately if the political will was present. This lack of political will and commensurate resources is compounded by an absence of adequate mechanisms and methodologies to measure gender progress.

The main tool to measure the implementation of the BPfA in UN agencies was the System-Wide Medium Term Plan (SWMTP) for gender. The

first SWMTP was developed prior to the Beijing conference (1990–5). The second, from 1996–2001 acted as a monitoring tool to measure system-wide progress on each of the 12 critical areas of concern of the BPfA, thus becoming the UN's own accountability document. The next plan covered 2002–05 and likewise structured itself around the critical areas of the BPfA, outlining the work of different UN agencies.

In 2011, the UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women (UN Women) was formed by consolidating the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the Secretariat, UNIFEM and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). The UN document outlining the functions and structures for the entity is the *Comprehensive Proposal for the Composite Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: Report of the Secretary-General (A/64/588)*. This document states that the entity will:

6 (d) Support Member States in implementing and monitoring the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008) and other resolutions, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

(f) Lead and coordinate United Nations system strategies, policies and actions on gender equality and women's empowerment to promote effective system-wide gender mainstreaming, drawing fully on the comparative advantage of United Nations actors; and

(g) Strengthen the accountability of the United Nations system, including through oversight, monitoring and reporting on system-wide performance on gender equality.

This passes the responsibility for monitoring BPfA implementation and system-wide performance on gender equality to UN Women. This is a vexed position as although it is responsible as the Secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which is the mechanism for member states to report on their progress for the BPfA, it is also a UN agency, not a part of the UN Secretariat, and when strengthening the accountability of the UN system,

it has no authority to enforce anything, but simply to ‘oversight, monitor and report’. What, however, is more disappointing from the perspective of the implementation of the BPfA is that under the new UN System-Wide Action Plan for Implementation of the CEB<sup>5</sup> United Nations System-Wide Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2012) there is no longer a requirement for agencies to report specifically to the critical areas of concern. The plan’s structure outlines detailing of an agency’s policy and plan, gender-responsive performance management, strategic planning, monitoring and reporting, evaluation, gender-responsive auditing, programme review, financial resource tracking, financial resource allocation, gender architecture, organisational culture, assessment, development, knowledge generation and communication, and coherence. This may look at more rigorous internal mechanisms for mainstreaming gender, but the content and processes from the BPfA are all but lost in the UN’s internal reporting.

## 2.2 *Singing the song of gender mainstreaming*

In many respects, UN Women has been set an impossible task in monitoring the work of other UN agencies on gender, as well as servicing CSW and running development projects, advocacy and leadership on gender. Its founding document suggests that approximately US\$125 million per annum is needed for a basic staff complement, related operating costs and start-up capacity at the country, regional and headquarters levels, as well as an additional US\$375 million per annum in the initial phase to respond to country-level requests for UN programmatic support. In its annual report 2013–14, UN Women states that it is yet to secure its funding target of US\$610 million in total resources for the biennium, receiving just US\$275.4 million (UN Women 2014). Operating at less than half of its targeted funding, it is hard to see how UN Women can live up to the expectations that have been placed on it. This issue of resourcing for gender issues in the UN hark back to the pre-Beijing agenda and fail to commit to the requirements stated in the UN’s own documents produced at and since Beijing.

If this seems a cynical assessment of the UN holding itself to account on gender mainstreaming within its own house, rest assured, it is little different, and perhaps even better than the approach some governments take to developing their national reports for Beijing+5, +10, +15 and now +20. At best this process involves a committee and some consultants to gather information from various departments to compile statistics and case studies

of best practice. At worst it is done in-house by one department simply pulling together the highlights of work and neglecting a rigorous and critical analysis of the challenges. The presence of NGO ‘shadow reports’ is an excellent initiative and provides a space for civil society to hold governments accountable to their commitments, but in this era where there can be no opening of text on the BPfA or development of new text, it also seems that the importance of this watershed document is appearing everywhere as a commitment to its ideals, but in fact is nowhere in terms of accountability, except by the NGOs. Is the BPfA passé?

The BPfA identified gender mainstreaming as the strategy to deliver gender equality within the UN’s policy and programmes. Gender mainstreaming also became our song sheet as gender specialists and activists, and we worked to mainstream gender wherever we could – from poverty to the environment, roads and bridges and macroeconomics. This panacea of gender mainstreaming has been sharply criticised. Patti O’Neill<sup>6</sup> claims:

... we welcomed gender mainstreaming as such an important breakthrough in the Beijing context, we then worked hard to put good policies in place and then worked hard (sometimes against the odds) to institutionalise and operationalise gender mainstreaming. We have done this without taking the time to step back and critically assess whether the approach has produced positive changes in the way development is conceived, planned and implemented (2004: 45).

Endless articles have voiced discontent with this approach, echoing the title of a book by Rebecca Tiessen in 2007, *Everywhere/Nowhere: Gender Mainstreaming in Development Agencies*. Even in a rural district of Vietnam some weeks ago, during interviews on assessing gender issues in disaster preparedness, I interviewed a local government official working in the agricultural sector. He had received gender training a number of times, and upon asking him what he had learnt and how it was relevant to disasters he replied: ‘Now I know how to mainstream gender issues’. When I asked what that meant to him he told me that he added gender issues into everything now. I asked for an example and he grew increasingly impatient with me stating that ‘it is now in everything – I look at gender in everything’. I asked what everything was, maybe just one specific instance, and he rolled his eyes and told me he couldn’t pick one thing, it was just ‘all of them’. We

have invested heavily in training to ‘capacity build’ others, but what has it actually achieved? We saunter off thinking ‘everything’ has been done, but the situation often remains unchanged.

There are pockets of change and inspiration, but these are typified by extraordinary women, working tirelessly against the mainstream, forging often small but effective transformation in their communities. These women grow more influential as they meet like-minded women (and sometimes men) and have the potential to create something powerful. This is what Beijing accomplished – bringing like-minded women together on a huge global scale – it gave us energy, inspiration, tools and contacts to realise that our experiences were shared across the globe and our capacity as networks and NGOs nurtured our work and built its effectiveness.

My thesis revealed that the greatest potential for change has occurred at the level of the individual and the personal–political–international linkages they made through these NGOs and women’s movements. It is the connections developed by individual women and the work they conducted, in changing global contexts that created change, like the UNV/UNDP/UNIFEM project, while the UN itself shows little evidence of adopting an approach sensitive to the needs of the BPfA in a comprehensive institutional sense. Instead, changes within the UN have been led by a handful of brave and pioneering women, within a very hierarchical UN bureaucratic structure. Progress has been constrained by a consistent lack of resourcing and political commitment.

### **3 Donning my platform heels again**

My work as a UNV implementing the BPfA in a country office in Vietnam finished in 1999 and I then worked on the Vietnamese Report for the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action for the Beijing+5 Special Session in New York as a consultant. Fast forward 15 years, I returned to Vietnam and last year I was commissioned to assist the Government of Vietnam (GoV) with the drafting process for their report for Beijing+20. I sat at my desk contemplating the changes in the implementation of this document 15 years later. As I stepped into my platform heels again I felt a sense of comfort from my well-worn shoes, but I also found they had suffered the perils of global fashion and balancing on them was no longer so easy.

The 12 critical areas do not provide the necessary space and emphasis for the new bunions faced by women in climate change and the emerging

democratisation and strapping in the festering sores of years of continued violence against women, increasing trafficking in women, combined with the surging impacts of the global economy on women’s labour in garment factories, lack of social safety nets and recognition of women’s unpaid and underpaid work, made walking uncomfortable. However, in some ways, it doesn’t matter what the 12 critical areas represent, all the issues that half the population face will never sit neatly and concisely in 12 themes, and we need to remember that they didn’t in 1995 either, but there certainly needs to be a space to discuss how the global situation for women has changed.

Exacerbating poverty in Africa is even heavier for women to carry on their shoulders and the impact of war and civil unrest which continues to be led by men is felt most heavily by women, but women are illustrating new, albeit limited, roles in emerging democracies. The most democratic of all tools – social media – has proven to have been even more powerful than many government policies could ever have anticipated in 1995. This has brought amazing potential for women to connect across boundaries, learn new skills, access new information and share experiences, while simultaneously being barraged by infinite images of photoshopped women with a mass audience which means many more millions of people will have seen Kim Kardashian’s backside than will ever hear of the BPfA. The power the internet plays in influencing the minds, hearts and souls of young women is both a crisis and an opportunity, and in many ways it provides the only access that many of us have to discussions taking place in New York in 2015 to commemorate Beijing+20, and our BPfA.

#### **3.1 Still dancing**

Was I wearing rose coloured glasses with my platform heels in the 1990s? Did I really think that working in the UN, or advising national governments on reports going to the UN were going to make a difference for the lives of women around the world? Undoubtedly my youth and energy have been surpassed by increasing cynicism, but I still believe wholeheartedly in the ability to create change. I don’t want a new pair of shoes, but I want to keep dancing. I want another NGO Forum for Women – we don’t need platforms, we just need space to dance – with women who are barefoot, others with stilettos, and lots of comfortable shoes, but we need the dance floor, we need a truly global space to share our stories. We ‘oldies’ who went to Beijing still have new ideas and a lot to offer,

we may have got the dance tune wrong, gender mainstreaming was not the best song sheet, but we have made some gains, and our insight is still sharp.

One of the stories I collected from PNG in the late 1990s came from an incredibly effective grassroots organiser Lydia Gah. In 1997 Lydia Gah was the Vice President of the Business and Professional Women's Association of West New Britain, a remote island region of PNG. She told me that Beijing was

one of the most important events in her life. She set up a savings account to fund her daughter to attend what she thought would be the next UN World Conference on Women (WCW) in 2005.<sup>7</sup> It is now 2015 and I now have a young daughter and I have opened an account for her, but I doubt there will ever be another WCW. I do, however, dream that there will be a global NGO Forum that I can take her to, and on that day I will hand her my platform heels and dance the night away.

## Notes

- 1 Advisory Group to the Prime Minister of Australia on the Beijing Conference Process.
- 2 From March 2001 the IACWGE became the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), following the establishment of the UN Chief Executives Board.
- 3 The pattern has been that the groups meet in the days prior to CSW as gender focal-points from various UN agencies which are already in
- 4 Meeting held in New York, 23–26 February, 1999.
- 5 Chief Executives Board for Coordination.
- 6 Gender and development (GAD) staffer from NZAID, now Gender Advisor to OECD-DAC in Paris.
- 7 Interview with Lydia Gah, Port Moresby, 8 May 1997.

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