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Beijing and Beyond . . .

Nicole Streeter†

I. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society. Empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples.¹

The United Nations' Fourth Women's Conference, held from September 4 through September 15, 1995, will go down in history as one of the largest global conferences of women.² The message of the conference was described by one attendee as "[s]ee[ing] the world through women's eyes."³ At the conference, 45,000 women from around the world gathered together⁴ and drafted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, an agenda for women's empowerment.

The Beijing Declaration memorialized a commitment to eradicate the increasing burden of poverty on women by addressing the structural causes of poverty and recognizing that social justice requires that women both are involved in the policy-making process and benefit from policies designed to aid the poor.⁵ It is vital that the increasing burden of poverty on women is eradicated since, globally, one-fourth of households are headed by women or dependent on female income.⁶ Furthermore, these households are often among the poorest because of the dramatic impact of childrearing responsibilities, wage discrimination, and housing discrimination. This phenome-

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¹ *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Advanced Unedited Draft*, U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, Platform for Action ¶ 43, Sept. 15, 1995, available at [gopher://gopher.undp.org:70/00/un.confs/women/off/a-20.en](http://gopher.undp.org:70/00/un.confs/women/off/a-20.en) [hereinafter *Beijing Declaration*].

² Barbara Yost, *Women's World Conference Was Eye-Opener for Attendees from Valley*, PHOENIX GAZETTE, Sept. 23, 1995, at E1.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Black Women and the World Conference*, EBONY, Dec. 1995, at 44.

⁵ *Beijing Declaration*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 16, 26. The Beijing Declaration declared a commitment to other areas affecting women as well, but this recent development piece focuses on the commitment to eradicate the plight of poor women.

⁶ *Id.* ¶ 26.

non has been called the "feminization of poverty," a term used to characterize the increase in the poverty of female-maintained households. Diana Pearce, a feminist researcher, illustrated this phenomenon in 1978.⁷ Her research showed that while the poverty level of many historically impoverished groups, namely the elderly, had decreased, that of families headed by women had increased.⁸ Feminization of poverty underscores the need for equality of women.

II. THE BACKGROUND LEADING UP TO THE BEIJING DECLARATION

The global fight for equality for women formally began twenty years ago in 1975, a year proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as "International Women's Year."⁹ For the next ten years, the United Nations called for a world-wide effort to examine the rights and status of women and bring more women into the decision-making process. During the "Decade for Women," as it was called, the General Assembly set a standard for equality between men and women in the adoption of the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" in 1981.¹⁰ In 1985, the "World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace" adopted the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women," to be implemented by the year 2000.¹¹

Ten years after the Nairobi Conference, and just four years before we enter the twenty-first century, equality between men and women has not been achieved and is the basis for the Beijing Declaration.¹² Some boundaries of gender division, particularly in the labor market, are being crossed as women enter traditionally male-dominated professions and men begin to share domestic responsibilities.¹³ However, most of the goals of the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for Advancement of Women" have not been achieved. In many parts of the world, crises persist and create barriers to the empowerment of women. These barriers range from wars of aggression, civil wars, and terrorism, to *de facto* discrimination.¹⁴ In reviewing the progress since the Nairobi Conference, the attendees of the Beijing Conference listed critical areas of concern that require action within the next five years.¹⁵ An area of great concern is the increase in the number of poor

⁷ Audrey Rowe, *The Feminization of Poverty: An Issue for the 90's*, 4 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 73, 73 (1991).

⁸ Diana Pearce & Kelley Elsworth, *Welfare and Women's Poverty: Reform or Reinforcement?*, 16 J. LEGIS. 141, 141 (1990).

⁹ *Beijing Declaration*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 26.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* ¶ 29.

¹³ *Id.* ¶ 28.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* ¶ 45.

women.¹⁶ The feminization of poverty is increasingly problematic, not only in developing countries but also in the so-called developed countries, such as the United States.¹⁷

III. THE PLATFORM FOR ACTION

Today, one quarter of all households world-wide are headed by women, and many of these households depend on female income.¹⁸ Additionally, these households continue to be among the poorest, largely as a result of the wage discrimination and occupational segregation that women experience in the job market.¹⁹

The women of the Beijing Conference, assessing the global structures that oppress women, noted that the economic recession in developing, as well as developed, countries has increased the burden on female-headed households. Because of the recession, many women cannot find jobs.²⁰ Those who do, are forced to take low-paying jobs that lack long-term job security²¹ and perpetuate their poverty. In addition, social welfare programs in many countries have not sufficiently addressed the concerns and needs of poor women.²² The Delegation, therefore, decided in the Beijing Declaration, that it is essential to design and monitor gender-sensitive programs. They affirmed their commitment to promote women's economic independence by addressing solutions to the structural causes of poverty, such as ensuring equal access for all women to resources and opportunities.²³ To accomplish this goal, the delegation proposed strategic objectives and called on various bodies, including governments, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, women's groups, and financial institutions to take certain actions to achieve these objectives.

A. The Objectives of the Beijing Conference

The Conference highlighted the rigidity of social roles, as well as women's limited access to power, education, and training. The Conference also addressed the failure to incorporate a gender perspective in all economic, political, and social planning to counteract the institutional causes which contribute to the feminization of poverty.²⁴

One strategic objective of the conference is to adopt macroeconomic policies and strategies to address the needs of poor women. With this

¹⁶ *Id.* ¶ 49.

¹⁷ *Id.* ¶ 50.

¹⁸ *Id.* ¶ 24.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* ¶ 21.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* ¶ 54.

²³ *Id.* ¶ 49.

²⁴ *Id.* ¶ 46.

objective in mind, the delegates suggest that governments, among others: analyze the impact of policies and programs on poverty and inequality from a female perspective; allocate public expenditures to promote economic opportunities and equal access to resources for poor women; formulate and implement policies supportive of female-headed households; adopt policies that enable poor women to find affordable housing; develop and implement anti-poverty programs; and develop measures to reintegrate poor women into productive employment.²⁵

Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration calls for grass-roots and women's organizations to instigate more effective welfare programs that target the causes of the feminization of poverty rather than merely addressing the effects.²⁶ The Declaration suggests that these organizations continue to engage in lobbying efforts and work with the government to ensure that female issues continue to be taken into account when legislation is implemented.²⁷

Another equally important objective of the Declaration is to adopt policies that would ensure equal access to economic resources.²⁸ To implement this objective requires the participation of financial and developmental institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The Beijing Declaration suggests that these institutions seek and mobilize additional financial resources "in a way that . . . uses all available funding sources" to eradicate poverty, particularly among poor women.²⁹ Moreover, the Declaration charged these institutions with the task of developing solutions to external debt so that programs for the poor, including women, will be financed.³⁰ These, and other actions are necessary to reduce the inequality and economic disparity faced by women.

The final, and perhaps the most important objective of the Conference, is to develop gender-based research strategies to address the feminization of poverty.³¹ Moreover, the attendees charged governments to develop methodologies for incorporating a gender perspective into every aspect of economic policy-making. We need better research to find more effective policies to respond to the feminization of poverty if we are to understand and combat this trend. Unless this research focuses on the particular needs of women, the feminization of poverty will continue.

²⁵ *Id.* ¶ 60.

²⁶ *Id.* ¶ 62.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* ¶ 61.

²⁹ *Id.* ¶ 61(a).

³⁰ *Id.* ¶ 61(c).

³¹ *Id.* ¶ 69.

IV. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREARING RESPONSIBILITIES AND THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

Governments must implement policies and programs from a female perspective because certain issues, for example, childrearing responsibilities,³² impact more dramatically on the financial well-being of women than men.³³ Culturally, women have borne the responsibility for raising children.³⁴ Childcare often is unavailable and unaffordable for poor women.³⁵ This exacerbates the problem poor women have finding full-time regular work. Because of difficulties finding childcare, poor women often are forced into part-time, underpaid jobs.³⁶

Therefore, in order to achieve the goals of the Beijing Conference, governments need to address issues such as childcare. A public childcare system must be implemented.³⁷ Childcare is not merely a service needed by poor women but contributes to the good of society, and should be viewed as such.

V. CONCLUSION

While the goals and objectives of the Conference are admirable, the five-year deadline set for meeting the objectives is unrealistic. As one newsreporter commented, "[the] [l]ofty, global ideas and documents are no match for Third World realities."³⁸ Even in developed countries, where these objectives may not be as "lofty," they still are not likely to be accomplished within five years.

These objectives are not impossible. However, if we are to implement the objectives of the Conference by eradicating poverty through addressing its structural causes, we, the public and the government, need to change our attitudes and thought processes. Governments need to implement policies and programs from a gender perspective, specifically a female perspective. It is time for politicians and "the powers that be" to join us in the real world as we enter a new millennium and acknowledge that women are the majority of the population, that women are also a majority of the poor population,

³² Childrearing responsibilities are but one example of the many factors that impact the financial well-being of women more dramatically than men. However, this one example illustrates a gender specific factor that must be addressed if we are to combat the feminization of poverty.

³³ Diana Pearce, *Welfare Is Not for Women: Toward a Model of Advocacy to Meet the Needs of Women in Poverty*, 19 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 412, 413 (1985).

³⁴ National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity, *Women in Poverty*, 15 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 925, 930 (1982).

³⁵ Pearce, *supra* note 33, at 414.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ This was proposed in the United States during the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, but was never adopted. The proposal to create comprehensive day care centers encompassed the idea of creating centers that would provide children with health and "higher horizons" that they were deprived of in their homes. Pearce, *supra* note 33, at 416. For a full discussion of this proposal, see generally OSCAR ORNATI, *POVERTY AMID AFFLUENCE* 84-90 (1966).

³⁸ John Donnelly, *Egyptian Wives Still in Legal Bondage*, HOUS. CHRON., Oct. 8, 1995, at A34.

that women are a growing number of heads of households, that women are needed in the policy-making process, and that policies, to be effective, must address the particular needs of women. Only when this happens can we begin to combat the feminization of poverty.

