

The Time is Now: Achieving the Beijing Platform for Action

*Soroptimist International and Zonta International present this statement on behalf of their members. These recommendations originate from the experiences of 75,000 Soroptimists active in 122 countries and 28,500 Zonta members active in 63 countries. Across the world, Soroptimist and Zonta members are united in achieving gender equality for all. Their grassroots projects address the discrimination and inequality experienced by women and girls, supporting the achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda. Working in partnership with women, girls and their communities, members' projects **educate, empower and enable**, unlocking the potential of sustainable development and ensuring that no woman or girl is left behind.*

'No country has achieved gender equality'

Twenty-five years after agreeing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a revolutionary document providing a universal benchmark for women's rights and gender equality – no country has achieved equality for women and girls.

We should, however, celebrate achievements towards gender equality. More women and girls access education, awareness and action against gender-based violence is increasing, and we are closer to realising women's and girls' rights. Still, progress is fragile. Globally, changing political climates bring unacceptable pushback against women's and girls' rights. Such regression is detrimental to all, harming women and girls, preventing communities' sustainable development, and placing artificial limits on economies. Ultimately, a critical combination of a lack of political will, inaction and inadequate funding has caused uneven progress on the 12 Critical Areas of Concern.

Soroptimist International and Zonta International are advocating for the same things now as 25 years ago. It cannot take another 25 years to make the vision of the Beijing Platform for Action a reality.

Connecting the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda saw global agreement that gender equality is both an outcome and means of encouraging sustainable development. The interconnected nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) means gender equality (SDG5) is fundamental to the achievement of all goals. Importantly, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are complementary. Efforts to achieve one supports progress on the other. Significantly, the language in SDG5 emphasises the importance of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern; the language contained within this commitment cannot be diluted.

Alongside efforts to inform the public about the Sustainable Development Goals and support the private sector and other stakeholders with implementation, equivalent efforts must be

made with the Beijing Platform for Action, acknowledging their mutually reinforcing relationship. Young people are passionate about sustainable development and gender equality, yet many remain unaware of the Beijing Platform for Action. All stakeholders have a role in addressing the 12 Critical Areas of Concern, however, effective action requires knowledge and government support. Merely paying lip service to the Beijing Platform for Action commitments has never been enough; now is the time for action not rhetoric.

Education

Despite significant progress on girls' and women's participation in quality education, education and training is difficult to access in many situations. Those living in poverty or with low incomes, migrants, and those in conflict situations or unsafe and rural areas all face disproportionate barriers to accessing lifelong, high-quality education. Education remains essential for gender equality and sustainable development. It contributes to the autonomy, self-sustainability, and economic and social empowerment of women and girls. It is a highly effective tool for alleviating poverty for individuals and communities. Yet too often women and girls do not equally benefit from education, preventing them from realising their potential. Furthermore, in places where women are on average *more qualified* than men, their educational achievements are not translated into equal pay, promotions or leadership positions in the workplace. Education should include gender awareness training to avoid perpetuating gender inequality.

These actions and strategies will support girls and women of all ages to have full and equal access to education:

- Education services should be extended to women and girls who are migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons or unaccompanied minors, including those in transit and in refugee camps. Sufficient funding must be allocated to these specialised services.
- Children not receiving appropriate, quality education must be identified and provided with alternative schooling so they can catch up with their peers and reintegrate into the education system.
- Policies promoting access to education should also promote lifelong access to vocational training and non-formal education to benefit girls and women of all ages.
- To promote women's equal access and participation in STEAM subjects, gender sensitive interventions should be used.
- All educational environments and associated facilities must be made safe for women and girls to enable full and equal participation.
- Safe, inclusive and accessible transportation must be made available to all those attending school.
- Provide girls and school staff with practical information, sanitary products and private and safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities to decrease absenteeism and help girls manage menstruation in a healthy, safe and dignified manner.
- Gender awareness training must be included in all professional training, including for education professionals.

- Eliminate or reduce school fees and hidden costs of education, such as requirements to buy essential school resources or uniforms, that create barriers to entry.

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence remains one of the most significant barriers to achieving gender equality. This violence prevents women and girls from being equal participants in society at every level. Violence against women and girls is a fundamental human rights issue and a central sustainable development challenge. Intimate partner violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence are at epidemic proportions. With a third of all women having experienced physical or sexual violence, concerted action to combat gender-based violence is urgently needed; progress towards the Beijing Platform for Action commitments to reduce rates of gender-based violence has been unacceptably slow.

The following recommendations will support combatting gender-based violence:

- Take immediate action to make all forms of violence against women and girls illegal under criminal and human rights law. This includes legislating against female genital mutilation, domestic violence, rape, trafficking, psychological abuse and other acts that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm as defined in the Istanbul Convention.
- Develop, fund and implement national-level plans to end child marriage.
- Provide training and support to all those who interact with and assist victims of violence so they can better recognise, understand and respond to all forms of violence against women.
- Dedicate specific resources to essential services for women and their families escaping violent situations. Services requiring increased support include women's refuges, healthcare services, legal aid, social services, and education institutions.
- Include community leaders, and men and boys, in efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls.
- Recognise and support NGOs and civil society as key contributors to providing essential services to women and girls and as organisations that lead on approaches to eliminate gender-based violence.

Human Rights

With changing political climates, women's and girls' rights, and women human rights defenders are at risk. These rights are essential legal tools for achieving gender equality and the Beijing Platform for Action. Human rights processes facilitate accountability and address power imbalances. Women's human rights defenders play an essential role in realising the rights of women; it is vital that these women and their efforts are supported and protected, not attacked. The following recommendations support the realisation of women's rights as a critical dimension of gender equality:

- All states should ratify, remove all reservations and implement and participate in international human rights instruments, including CEDAW and its Optional Protocols and the Universal Periodic Review. Implementation must include transformation: incorporating international law into national legislation, policies and decision-making.
- Human rights-based approaches should be taken in all Beijing Platform for Action implementation efforts.
- Women and girls must be equipped with knowledge of their rights and the legal protections available to them.

Policy Administration for Gender Equality

Progress towards achieving gender equality as envisioned by the Beijing Platform for Action will continue to be slow without effective approaches to implementation. Guidelines on implementation methodologies and approaches that expedite the achievement of gender equality should be available to all stakeholders and included in National Action Plans. These guidelines should take into account the interconnectivity of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals, and include:

- A requirement to include women at all levels of decision making and leadership.
- Advice on using gender mainstreaming across all policies and programmes.
- Guidance on using gender budgeting as a means to deploy resources more efficiently and effectively to achieve gender equality.
- A requirement to develop accountability mechanisms that ensure that those making decisions and implementing policies are answerable to women and girls who the policies endeavour to benefit.
- Guidelines on collecting qualitative and quantitative data, disaggregating data, and gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation.

Conclusion

The world has changed rapidly since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was agreed in 1995. However, this agenda remains powerfully relevant today, especially in the context of renewed action on achieving gender equality prompted by the 2030 Agenda. We must all adjust our efforts to achieve the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in light of the current international context. Climate change and natural disasters disproportionately affect women. Austerity measures adopted after the global financial crisis also have unique effects on girls, women and their families. Migration, especially due to conflict, political instability, economic strife, disasters and climate change, exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and puts women and girls at risk. The Beijing Platform for Action directly addresses these challenges through the Critical Areas of Concern “Women and the Environment” and “Women in Conflict”, among others. This agenda bolsters the Sustainable Development Goals and continues to provide a comprehensive road map for the achievement of gender equality.

The interconnectivity between the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals simultaneously offers challenges and benefits to the implementation of efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. Challenges include assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating actions taken to realise gender equality. However, the advantage is that the best actions could have a dramatic impact, expediting the achievement of women's empowerment and gender equality. Getting it right now means we should not have to wait another 25 years to achieve gender equality.