

The World We Seek: Human Rights In The 21st Century

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Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP) began as an idea at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Witnessing the enthusiasm and energy with which 35,000 NGO representatives reviewed the status of women's rights around the globe and discussed strategies for achieving full rights for women, a group of us came together to deliberate the future. The Beijing conference and its antecedents had already taught us that the status of women had been fundamentally the same throughout history and across the world. Everywhere, men had easy access to the public sphere, women did not; men were trained, educated, and encouraged to work for equitable pay, women were not; men were able to recognize and celebrate their masculinity and take pride in their gender, women were not; men were praised for being outgoing, aggressive, articulate, and forceful, women were not; men were applauded for creativity, daring, and innovation, women were not. The result was a much higher rate of achievement, participation, and power in the male of the species and subjugation for the female. For the next several years, we continued our discussions in Casablanca, Berlin, Beirut, and elsewhere. We reached consensus that the structure of relations between men and women was not a plan by men to abuse and oppress women everywhere, even though on the surface it seemed that way – otherwise, how was it that religion, culture, art, literature, even the design and practice of political and economic power all supported and sustained this system? It took us on a journey through history to realize that the culprit was the foundational dynamic created not by one sex, but by the prevalent conditions in earlier times – the time when women spent most of their lives either pregnant, breastfeeding, or caring for children, most of whom would not survive. Those children who did survive to adulthood would help with economic survival of the family and later with the care of the elders (especially if the child were female). Work, sustenance, and warfare all took physical strength. Men and women engaged in activities that guaranteed the sustenance and survival of both sexes. Thus was created a social architecture that comprehended every dimension of human existence.

As time passed, societies created elaborate traditional practices to keep women monogamous and their sexuality protected and contained. Myths grew around the dangers of the female body, the temptations presented by women's hair as well as various female body parts, and the chaos that could ensue if the care were not taken to make the female body invisible and to set limits on women's space and movement. In parts of Africa, female genital mutilation became an inescapable ritual. In China, women's feet were bound in childhood to produce "two-inch lotus like" feet. In parts of the Middle East, the entire female body was covered in a shroud with only a split around the eyes to permit vision. In the West, women were sometimes burnt as witches.

The changes brought about by the industrial revolution altered the nature of production and prompted many women to enter the *paid* workforce for the first time. Scientific advances eliminated many diseases and made it possible for women to control childbearing. Enormous changes in lifestyle ensued as men and women began working in factories and moving to the cities. By the mid-nineteenth century, questions about the roles assigned to men and women began to surface. Women and some enlightened men noted the injustice of women's status, as the division of labor and segregation of spaces lost validity under the new circumstances and lifestyles. The previously prescribed gender roles became increasingly difficult to justify as societies changed. Those societies that had reached a higher level of development experienced the disparity earlier and changes in the status of women arrived sooner there. We realized that *patriarchy*, the controlling structure of this elaborate system that determined and sustained the unequal status of women, was primarily a product of history and not of culture.

The primacy of history over culture helped us understand why, even when unrecognized, the idea of human rights everywhere and always has been absolute – that every human being now and ever, here and everywhere, has been, is, and will be a claimant to human rights, whether he or she knows it or not; that there is no human right that in its nature is relative to any dictum, no matter what its source. It also alerted us to the fact that though universal in principle, these rights are in practice culture-bound and limited in application, but inexorably moving along the path of universality because cultures move and change as the exigencies of history move and change human beings, first a few and then through the few, the many.

The path to the practical achievement of human rights, however, has never been straight, unidirectional, or easy. Other priorities often overwhelm concern about rights. In the nineteenth century, preoccupation with colonial expansion, in the early twentieth century, the rise of totalitarian ideologies, world wars, and later the Cold War overwhelmed the struggle for human rights and especially women's rights. In 1948, at the dawn of the Cold War, the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights was adopted but much that happened between 1948 and early 1990s in international politics was influenced by the demands of the Cold War politics. There was always tension between a group of nations, mostly Western, that emphasized civil and political rights and a group, mostly from the Third World, that promoted social and economic rights. In either case, Cold War demands as determined by the major powers superseded other demands.

Despite all that, women have made significant progress since 1948. The UN Declaration encompassed women, but was not focused on women. It encompassed economic and social rights, but was not focused on them. It encompassed freedom across the world, but was not focused on the plight of the people still under colonial rule. Its existence, however, established the path forward, and by speeding up the insertion of binding rights in international covenants, it helped expand the idea of rights across the world, though not always uniformly. Two decades later, in the 1968 Tehran Conference on

Human Rights, economic and social rights were declared an integral part of human rights, although the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ECOSOC) to monitor these rights was not established until 1978. In 1975, in the United Nations First World Conference on Women, convened in Mexico City, the World Plan of Action for women's equality was adopted, the roots of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was planted, and all of that was crowned by the assertion that all issues are women's issues. In 1993, at the Second UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, we succeeded in gaining acceptance that "Women's Rights are Human Rights." In the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, women's reproductive rights were recognized and confirmed. And finally in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the first line of the Mission Statement declared that "The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment," and to that end signatories committed themselves as governments to implement the Platform for Action and urged the UN system, all other national and international governmental and non-governmental institutions, and all women and men "to fully commit themselves to contribute to the implementation of this Platform for Action."

To transfer women's human rights from the realm of the universal idea to the realm of social reality requires action taken in the name of the state, the only institution whose decisions are binding on all citizens and actors. Women's empowerment being pivotal for the achievement of women's human rights, Beijing signified a cusp – a bridge to a future of great promise. Clearly, decades of activism, encouraged and expanded globally, and spearheaded and strengthened by the UN conferences, had brought the ideas of the UN Declaration of Human Rights into sharper focus and pledges of the governments into more detailed and verifiable commitments. At the end of the twentieth century and with the end of the conflicts and rivalries of the Cold War, a spirit of optimism was in the air, and as heads of world governments gathered at the United Nations to announce the Millennium Development Goals, a widespread network of NGOs across the world pledged themselves to make sure that they would keep their promises and more.

The horrendous events of 9/11 and the wars that followed, however, shook the globe. The fear and anxiety that spread across the world through these cataclysmic events marginalized human rights at multiple levels of governance, from local to global. The robust language of the Beijing Conference focusing on human rights gave way to an emphasis on democracy, defined as elections, and on security – the effect of which was to curtail freedom. More than a decade after 9/11, we are witnessing both the inadequacy of "elections" and of military-centered security to promote peace or guarantee national or individual safety.

This may be a cause for dismay but not despair. Women have learned to take advantage of the ebbs and flows of our history. The world may be in disarray, but we are in a better position to face it and move forward. In the past, we have moved from seeking simply to walk in the public space unchaperoned,

to the right to education, to the right to hold a job, to the right to vote and stand for political office as citizens, to the right to be free from violence in the private and public space, to the kind of equality summarized in the 50/50 slogan.³

Women are now in a position to consider that our demands should evolve along with our evolving consciousness and the growing awareness around the world that women's rights are human rights. We are now ready to accept full responsibility as citizens of the world to think about a new vision for all citizens of that world – men and women. We will not forget the oppressions and continuing abuses suffered by many women across the world. But we realize that an equal share of the ruling 50 percent is not enough for us. We want to think about *"The World We Seek."* To make that better world become reality, equality is no longer enough for us or for the world. We must dare to plan the world we envision with and for 100 percent of its people.

3 For example, the UN Women campaign's slogan, "Planet 50-50 by 2030 – Step it Up for Gender Equality."