OCCASIONAL PAPER 15

Beijing Plus 10: An Ambivalent Record on Gender Justice

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UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
IFIs	international financial institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organization
WLUML	Women Living Under Muslim Laws
WTO	World Trade Organization

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SUMMARY

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (the "Beijing conference") was a landmark in policy terms, setting a global policy framework to advance gender equality. Ten years after Beijing, in March 2005, the UN's Commission on the Status of Women presided over an intergovernmental meeting in New York to review the progress achieved on the commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This "Plus Ten" event was decidedly low key. Its aim was not agenda setting but agenda confirming; not policy formulation, but policy affirmation. Whether it proves to be part of an ongoing worldwide movement in support of gender equality, or whether it marks the decline of that process, is a question that many in international women's movements are asking. This paper, drawing on research undertaken for the UNRISD report, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, reflects on the ambivalent record of progress achieved by women over the last decades and considers how the policy environment has changed over the period since the high point of the global women's movements.

Drawing on a number of commonly employed indicators of "women's progress", the paper argues that the record of achievement regarding gender equality is more ambivalent, and the causal influences more diverse and less unidirectional than is sometimes assumed. It also argues that development policies have an important role to play in securing outcomes, and that the first phase of the structural reforms (dating from the early 1980s) was in many respects negative for women. In the ten years since the Beijing Conference there have been some significant shifts in international development policy along with a growing appreciation of the need to develop gender aware policies. By the end of the 1980s, "market fundamentalism" and shock therapy had lost much of their appeal, opening up a space for new ideas and approaches in development policy and practice.

Growing discontent over the social effects of the reforms, as well as criticism from leading economists in the international financial institutions have brought about a policy shift, which is sometimes referred to as the "post-Washington Consensus". The new policies have shown a willingness to give social and political concerns greater attention, expressed under indicative headings such as "social capital" and "good governance". Social policy and, in particular, poverty relief moved up the scale of international priorities in the 1990s. But behind the apparent consensus forged by a shared vocabulary of "poverty reduction" and "social protection", there are conflicting understandings of social policy based on different values, priorities and understandings of state responsibility. There are serious concerns over whether sustainable routes out of poverty are being provided or can be provided in the absence of appropriate job creation measures and regional regeneration. Given women's greater share of responsibility for unpaid care work and their less advantageous access to cash and income-earning opportunities, the redefinition of state responsibility and the greater role given to market forces are likely to impact adversely on their time and their access to social benefits.

The retreat from market fundamentalism has seen a partial rehabilitation of the state as a significant actor in development, and emphasis has been placed on "good governance" through democracy, participation, decentralization and community ownership. A broad understanding of a "good governance" agenda would embrace political liberalization, participation and human rights, and would address problems of social inequality as part of a fundamental commitment to democracy. Such an agenda would encompass the kinds of issues of state legitimacy, capacity and accountability that social movements and women's movements have confronted for decades. Although governance reforms can and should address issues of government legitimacy and the public participation of socially excluded groups, they have often been dominated by a much narrower preoccupation. Hence, while the recent donor attention to the question of "good governance" is to be welcomed, much depends on how it is interpreted. A great deal depends on whether the democratization of politics and the participation of marginalized social groups are seen as integral to reform objectives and are embraced in institutional change; and on whether reducing social and gender inequalities are among the core principles guiding the programme of state institutional transformation. There are aspects of the current international political climate that place limits on this occurring, namely the rise to political power of conservative forces in the United States and elsewhere, and the attacks of 11 September 2001. While the first has seen the adoption by the United States of conservative policies with respect to women's reproductive and sexual rights, supported by religious forces, the latter has focused more attention and funding on "security" at the expense of development and human rights. The paper examines how this ensemble of changing international policy and political climate over the past decade has given rise to new issues and challenges for those active in global women's movements.

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