

Background

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Beyond the Words at Beijing + 10: How U.N. Policy Falls Short of Women's Best Interests

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The United Nations held its Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, and First Lady Hillary Clinton raised the event's profile by leading the U.S. delegation to the conference. The conference and its resulting documents—the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—covered an expansive agenda organized around 12 topics, from “Women and Poverty” to “Women and Health” to “Human Rights of Women” and “The Girl-Child.”

However, much of the Beijing conference centered on controversial topics relating to reproduction and sexuality, notably abortion and sexual orientation. By focusing on such topics, the conference gave short shrift to some of the most basic concerns shared by the great majority of women around the world.

This year, the U.N. observes the 10th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration (Beijing + 10), with special attention during the annual meetings of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (February 28–March 11, 2005). Delegates to the conference should use this opportunity to identify strategies to solve women's most pressing needs. In some cases, women's very survival is at stake. The United States, for its part, should continue to focus its domestic policy and international aid on fundamental issues facing women, such as basic health care, educational opportunity, political and economic empowerment, and fighting human trafficking.

Talking Points

- The 1995 Beijing Conference on Women and resulting documents failed to address women's most pressing needs adequately, instead focusing largely on topics relating to sexuality, reproduction, and gender mainstreaming.
- While the goals of the Beijing documents are laudable in their recognition of family, they cannot be attained unless marriage is acknowledged and strengthened as the building block of the family.
- The United States should continue to focus its domestic policy and international aid on fundamental issues facing women. A pro-woman policy agenda should (1) promote the domestic and economic security of women through marriage and family, (2) provide security to women through strong defense and protection of the vulnerable, (3) pursue women's political enfranchisement, and (4) provide economic relief and empowerment to women.

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Pro-Marriage, Pro-Family, and Pro-Woman

Marriage is a fundamental social institution, providing the foundation of a harmonious and enriching family life. It has served as the basic building block of the family for societies throughout history. Regardless of religion, culture, or constitutional tradition, societies have always agreed on the nature of marriage as a time-tested pillar of civilization. Modern social science research confirms its importance to the welfare of all family members, especially children.

The institution of marriage has been tested and reaffirmed across the world over thousands of years. Any serious policy attempt to strengthen the family is incomplete if it does not recognize the importance of marriage.

As such a basic and fundamental institution, marriage warrants attention in the Beijing documents' discussion of family. Yet the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action notably omit language concerning marriage and its impact on women. The Platform for Action recognizes that "the family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened" and that "women play a critical role in the family,"¹ but nowhere is marriage mentioned in the Beijing documents' language about family.

The Beijing documents describe the need to acknowledge "the social significance of maternity, motherhood and the role of parents" and suggest that these roles "must not be a basis for discrimination."² However, they fail to mention marriage as an institution to be acknowledged or strengthened. While the goals expressed in the Beijing documents are laudable in their recognition of the family, they cannot be attained unless marriage is specifically acknowledged and strengthened as the building block of the family.

Similarly, the Beijing documents place a commendable emphasis on eradicating poverty among women around the world. However, their approach and proposed solutions to these conditions ignore the important roles that family and marriage play in economic well-being. The Beijing documents refer only vaguely to the notion of family when they mention that "changes in family structures have placed additional burdens on women, especially those who provide for several dependents."³ That is the only mention of family in the broader discussion of poverty and the limited economic opportunities for women. No reference is made to family as a potential asset in overcoming economic hardship. The Beijing documents instead focus on concepts such as "mainstreaming a gender perspective" and "combat[ing] the feminization of poverty."⁴

Decades of social science research suggest that the intact family, when compared with other common family forms, produces the best social and economic outcomes for women and children. Family breakdown is associated with a host of social ills, including lower income, lower levels of education, poorer health, and lower life expectancy. Non-intact families also suffer from greater risk of crime, illegitimacy, welfare dependence, and drug or alcohol addiction.⁵

Family breakdown due to divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing is associated with increased poverty. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth finds that over three-quarters of all children suffering from long-term poverty come from broken families or families in which the parents have never married.⁶ Despite such research, both the Commission on the Status of Women and the Beijing documents fail to recognize stronger families as a vehicle to reduce poverty.

1. U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, "Platform for Action," Beijing, September 1995, paragraph 29, at www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/plat1.htm (February 23, 2005).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, paragraph 47.
4. *Ibid.*, paragraphs 48 and 57.
5. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, 2002; Federal Reserve Board, *Survey of Consumer Finance*, 1998; and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, Wave II, 1996, as discussed in *The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts*, The Heritage Foundation, April, 2002.

The Beijing documents provide an important platform for addressing violence against women. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence against women is universally condemned. Rather than recognizing the family as a natural shield against such violence, the Beijing Platform for Action casts a suspect eye in the direction of the home: “[I]n many cases, violence against women and girls occurs in the family or within the home.”⁷ Meanwhile, some women’s groups have disparaged marriage and family because of spousal abuse of women.

Violence against women that occurs in the home—like all violence against women—should not be tolerated. The U.S. should encourage other countries to pass legislation that provides women with strong legal protection from would-be abusers, including family members. However, the institution of marriage, properly understood, is itself a defense for women against violence—not part of the problem.

Both the stable intact family and the institution of marriage are actually important contributors to diminishing violence against women and children. Research in developed countries finds that marriage serves as a more protective environment for women against violence and abuse.

Data from the U.S. Department of Justice National Crime Victimization Survey find that

never-married mothers are more than twice as likely to suffer domestic abuse than mothers who have been or are currently married.⁸ Similarly, children from divorced or never-married mothers are six to 30 times more likely to suffer from serious child abuse than are children raised by both biological parents in marriage.⁹ The Beijing documents should recognize this relationship between family breakdown and violence and should seek to ensure that all nations and cultures offer women the security of an intact family.

In general, the Beijing documents appear to pay lip service to the concepts of family and marriage, but they offer no convincing policy solutions that will strengthen or promote either institution. The U.S. contribution to this discussion should incorporate the vital role of strong families in reducing a whole host of social ills. The U.S. Department of State should work to build an alliance of family-friendly nations that will work together to support and uphold the value and importance of family and marriage.

Other Problems in the Beijing Documents

In addition to neglecting the importance of marriage and family to millions of women worldwide, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979–2000, as discussed in *The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts*, The Heritage Foundation, April 2002. A child in long-term poverty is defined as a child who has been poor for at least half of the years since birth. Of all children who experience long-term poverty, 31.9 percent come from families of never-married mothers; another 22.7 percent are children born out of wedlock whose mother has subsequently married; and 23.3 percent were born inside wedlock to parents who later divorced. Overall, 77.9 percent of all children suffering from long-term poverty come from broken or never-married families. Only 22.1 percent of children experiencing long-term poverty come from intact married families.
7. U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, “Platform for Action,” paragraph 117.
8. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *National Crime Victimization Survey 1992–2001*, Robert Rector, Patrick F. Fagan, and Kirk A. Johnson, “Marriage: Still the Safest Place for Women and Children,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1732, March 9, 2004. Domestic violence is defined as being the victim of rape/sexual assault, robbery, assault, or aggravated assault by a boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, ex-boyfriend, ex-girlfriend, or ex-spouse. These data refer to mothers with children under age 12; mothers with older children cannot be identified separately in the survey. According to the 1999 NCVS, 1.5 percent of currently married, divorced, or separated mothers are abused by their spouses or former spouses. By contrast, 3.3 percent of mothers who have never married are abused by a boyfriend or partner.
9. Analysis of British data based on “Comparative Risk Ratios for Serious Abuse 1982–1988,” in Robert Whelan, *Broken Homes & Battered Children: A Study of the Relationship Between Child Abuse and Family Type* (London: Family Education Trust, 1994). No similar data are available for the United States. See Patrick Fagan, “The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1115, May 15, 1997, at www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1115.cfm.

include language and goals that are antithetical to the legitimate needs and rights of women and girls. These measures contravene parental rights, advocate a “gender perspective” in all policymaking, and cite heavily from U.N. documents that have not been ratified by the U.S.

These problems are evidence of the radical feminist agenda that has permeated the U.N. women’s agenda. A number of the Beijing policies fall far short of directing global efforts toward the best interests and true equality for women. For example, they:

- **Curtail parental rights by asserting adolescent sexual health privacy rights.** “Counseling and access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for adolescents are still inadequate or lacking completely, and a young women’s right to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent is often not considered.”¹⁰ Minors should have parents’ or guardians’ guidance for such sensitive health issues.
- **Mainstream a “gender perspective.”** The Beijing documents repeatedly advance “gender mainstreaming,” which “involves ensuring that *gender perspectives* and attention to the goal of gender equality are *central to all activities*—policy development, research, advocacy/dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects.”¹¹ The strategy begins with the U.N.’s fuzzy definition of *gender*, which it views as “socially constructed” and “context/time-specific and changeable.” Gender, according to the U.N., “is part of the broader socio-cultural context.”¹² “Mainstreaming a gender perspective”

appears to be the U.N.’s application of feminist theory to policymaking.

- **Advocate gender quotas.** “[Governments should] commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees...setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men.”¹³ Representation through quotas does not contribute to advancing women’s station on the basis of merit.
- **Cite international treaties not ratified by the U.S.** The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action frequently cite the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The U.S. Senate has not ratified either U.N. document because of their controversial content and potential conflict with domestic law.

Real Women, Real Concerns

“A document that respects women’s intelligence should devote at least as much attention to literacy as to fertility,” wryly observed one Beijing conference delegate.¹⁴ Yet the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are replete with policy statements related to fertility and reproduction, thereby making it appear that this issue is a chief policy concern among women. If one of the original purposes of feminism was to create a society in which women are not reducible to their anatomy or reproductive capacity, the Beijing documents have contributed little to attaining that goal. Women around the world have real con-

10. *Ibid*, paragraph 93.

11. U.N. Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, “Gender Mainstreaming,” at www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm (February 23, 2005); emphasis added.

12. U.N. Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, “Gender Mainstreaming: Concepts and Definitions,” at www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm (February 23, 2005).

13. U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, “Platform for Action,” paragraph 190a.

14. Representative of the Holy See, written statement, in U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, “Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” Beijing, September 4–15, 1995, Chapter 5, paragraph 11, at www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/off/a—20.en (February 23, 2005).

cerns about their families, economic situation, health, educational opportunity, and political empowerment. A pro-woman policy agenda should seriously address these concerns with a more holistic view of women.

What should a pro-woman policy agenda include? As already discussed, it should strengthen and protect marriage and family as the fundamental building block of society and the safest place for women and children. It should defend and protect the victims of extreme poverty, rampant diseases like HIV/AIDS, and trafficking in persons. It should promote equal legal rights and political enfranchisement for women. Finally, a pro-woman agenda ought to be guided by the principal goal of fostering and preserving human dignity.

The U.S. government has pursued a number of policies to advance women's rights and meet real needs around the world. This year's 10th anniversary observance of the Beijing Conference on Women offers an opportunity to build on these efforts and to share effective strategies with other governments. Specifically:

- **Promote the domestic and economic security of women through marriage and family.** Domestically, U.S. policymakers have identified unwed childbearing and family breakdown as a root cause of poverty. Welfare reform policies have encouraged marriage and family formation and have significantly reduced welfare dependence in the U.S. in the past decade. While the lessons of American welfare reform are not all directly transferable across cultures, marriage and family do provide economic and physical security to women around the world. For example, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief legislation promotes marital fidelity and abstinence outside of marriage to help stop the spread of
- HIV/AIDS and to protect women, in particular, from becoming infected.
- **Provide security to women through strong defense and protection of the vulnerable.** President Bush's call for liberty around the globe is especially welcome to women who suffer under brutal regimes, as Afghan women freed from the tyranny of the Taliban can attest. In regions destabilized by warfare or natural disasters, women and children are disproportionately vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including forced labor and commercial sex trafficking. The State Department estimates that 600,000 to 800,000 individuals—mostly women and children—are trafficked across international borders annually. The United States has taken an aggressive role in ending this modern-day slavery worldwide.¹⁵
- **Pursue women's political enfranchisement.** Political participation is a liberty to which American women have become accustomed, but many women around the world still yearn for it. Through educational exchanges, workshops abroad, and distribution of materials, the U.S. can spread knowledge of and capacity for women's political participation, as it is currently doing in Afghanistan and the Middle East.¹⁶ The U.S. also introduced and secured adoption of a 2003 U.N. General Assembly resolution on practical steps toward the political enfranchisement of women worldwide.¹⁷
- **Provide economic relief and empowerment to women.** The U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Account initiative makes aid contingent on factors such as political and economic freedom. The selection criteria include a number of measures that would improve women's lives, particularly the fiscal

15. U.S. Department of State, "Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons," at www.state.gov/g/tip (February 23, 2005).

16. For example, see U.S. Department of State, "Middle East Partnership Initiative," at mepi.state.gov/mepi (February 23, 2005).

17. Press release, "UN General Assembly Adopts U.S.-Sponsored Resolution on Women and Political Participation," U.S. Department of State, Office of International Women's Issues, December 22, 2003, at www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/rep/28497.htm (February 23, 2005).

year 2005 criterion of girls' primary school completion rates.¹⁸ However, the major obstacles preventing women from succeeding economically are bad policies and failed institutions in the countries where they reside. Studies have shown that foreign assistance can be most effective when countries adopt policies and institutions that are conducive to economic growth and development.¹⁹ U.S. assistance should be focused on changing policies and bolstering institutions that open up opportunities for all people, including women and children, to succeed economically and that offer fair and impartial justice.

Conclusion

In light of its deep commitment to promoting human rights and respect for women around the world, the United States should not neglect this opportunity to highlight women's real needs and concerns. The 2005 anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women provides an opportunity to

unite countries in solidarity to improve the lives of women through improved education, access to health care, economic empowerment, and freedom from exploitation.

The risk remains, however, that the discourse will be sidelined into discussions largely unrelated to the everyday welfare of women. In the interest of women and girls around the world, the United States and other champions of women's well-being should persevere toward policy that will make real strides toward the advancement of women.

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18. Millennium Challenge Corporation, "Report on the Criteria and Methodology for Determining the Eligibility of Candidate Countries for Millennium Challenge Account Assistance in FY 2005," pp. 3–4 and 8, at www.mca.gov/about_us/congressional_reports/Report%20to%20Congress%20on%20Criteria%20and%20Methodology%20FY051.pdf (February 23, 2005).

19. See Marc A. Miles, Edwin J. Feulner, and Mary Anastasia O'Grady, *2005 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2005), at www.heritage.org/index (February 23, 2005).