

ISSUE BRIEF

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At U.N., Radicals Regret Lack of “Progress” and Seek to Feminize Post-2015 Development Agenda

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Against the backdrop of ongoing negotiations over the United Nations’ new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), delegates and activists from around the world met at the U.N. headquarters in New York last month for the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which this year commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995.

While the CSW meeting has historically been characterized by contentious negotiations over the language of outcome documents, the organizers and delegates this year preferred to minimize controversy, adopting a relatively benign political declaration¹ on the first day of the two-week meeting, which did little more than reaffirm the documents that had been negotiated at past conferences. This decision to avoid some of the perennial battles that often define such conferences at the U.N. greatly upset liberal feminists who were geared up to promote their radical agenda at this “Beijing +20” commemoration.²

Although 20 years have passed since the historic 1995 conference, the Beijing Platform for Action and its liberal cheerleaders still give short shrift to the urgent needs of women,³ too often reducing women’s needs exclusively to matters of sexuality and reproduction. Policymakers and delegates seeking to genuinely improve women’s lives ought to identify the

real problems that women face, and focus on crafting specific solutions to address them. Such policies include improving maternal and child health by investing in basic health care, combating human trafficking and prostitution, and pursuing legal and economic freedoms, which greatly reduce poverty and discrimination for women and their families.

Feminists Aggrieved

Not only were the liberal feminists at CSW aggrieved by the missed opportunity to further their objectives—among them, promoting contraceptive use, eliminating any restrictions on or access to abortion, and promoting “sexual rights”—many of them expressed disappointment about their overall success in these areas over the past two decades. And rightly so: While the far Left did succeed in inserting its language and objectives deep into the Beijing documents, it has not managed to gain much new ground since then, largely due to the efforts of pro-life and pro-family groups and delegates who have promoted respect for the national sovereignty of U.N. member states that protect unborn life in their domestic laws.

At the time, the document that emerged from the 1995 conference—the Beijing Platform for Action—was considered a great victory for then-First Lady Hillary Clinton (who led the U.S. delegation to the conference) and liberal ideologues, broadly enumerating rights and setting ambitious targets for achieving supposed gender equality in the near future. Today, radical feminists and their allies in the U.N. bureaucracy bemoan what they see as a lack of progress in achieving many of their goals. To a sympathetic crowd, the deputy executive director of U.N. Women, the U.N. organization dedicated to gender

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equality, proclaimed, “gender equality and women’s empowerment is humanity’s biggest project in this century,” and insisted that “progress has been far too slow.... [I]t’s going to take nearly a century, 81 years, to get gender parity.”⁴ Consider this statement from U.N. Women’s executive director:

Nearly 20 years after the adoption of the Platform for Action, *no country has achieved equality for women and girls* and significant levels of inequality between women and men persist. Critical areas of insufficient progress include access to decent work and closing the gender pay gap; rebalancing of the care workload; ending violence against women; reducing maternal mortality and *realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights*; and participation in power and decision-making at all levels.⁵ (Emphasis added.)

Such “areas of insufficient progress” bear remarkable resemblance to the standard fare on a feminist wish list, such as seeking “equal pay for equal work,”⁶ mandating gender quotas, and “mainstreaming a gender perspective.” The U.N. defines gender mainstreaming as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programmes, in all areas and at all levels.... The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”⁷ Gender equality is under-

stood to mean equality of outcomes, not equality of opportunity or equality before the law.

While 20 years ago in Beijing advocates of “gender mainstreaming” first sought to incorporate a far-reaching “gender perspective” into all policies and programs, the political and semantic battles over gender have expanded to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues and so-called sexual rights. According to U.N. Women’s definition, gender

refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable.⁸

To that end, feminists are pursuing the following strategy to influence the post-2015 development agenda: “It is crucial to link gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approaches in development policies and programmes, as gender equality, non-discrimination on the basis of sex and gender identity, and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights are fundamental universal human rights principles.”⁹

1. U.N. Women, “Political Declaration on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” draft, January 20, 2015, http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/declaration_draft_20_jan%202015.pdf (accessed May 11, 2015).
2. For more information on the radical feminist agenda that permeates the U.N., see Grace Melton, “In Bed with Radical Feminists: The U.N.’s Misguided Women’s Agenda,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3279, February 28, 2005, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/in-bed-with-radical-feminists-the-uns-misguided-womens-agenda>.
3. Jennifer A. Marshall, Melissa G. Pardue, and Grace Smith, “Beyond the Words at Beijing +10: How U.N. Policy Falls Short of Women’s Best Interests,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1829, February 28, 2005, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2005/02/beyond-the-words-at-beijing-10-how-un-policy-falls-short-of-womens-best-interests>.
4. U.N. News Centre, “Interview: Gender Equality Remains ‘Humanity’s Biggest Project,’ Declares UN Official,” March 16, 2015, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50341#:VVDE81_D_Gg (accessed May 11, 2015).
5. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, “Introduction,” in *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome*, 2nd ed., United Nations, 2014.
6. For further information, see Rachel Greszler and James Sherk, “Equal Pay for Equal Work: Examining the Gender Gap,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4227, May 22, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/05/equal-pay-for-equal-work-examining-the-gender-gap>.
7. U.N. Economic and Social Council, “Women 2000: Gender Mainstreaming—Agreed Conclusions 1997/2,” A/52/3, September 18, 1997, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/GMS.PDF> (accessed May 11, 2015).
8. U.N. Women, “Concepts and Definitions,” <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm> (accessed May 11, 2015).
9. U.N. Women, “Gender Mainstreaming in Development Programming: Guidance Note,” 2014, p. 15, <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2014/gendermainstreaming-issuesbrief-en%20pdf.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2015).

Secretary-General's Progress Report

In anticipation of the Beijing +20 commemoration, the U.N. released the Secretary-General's report¹⁰ on the world's progress in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which generally painted a less dismal picture of the state of women's rights in the world today than that described by the aforementioned feminists. The report focused more on basic rights and living standards for women, noting progress in a number of areas. At the same time, it regrettably continued in some places to misplace confidence in feminist strategy to achieve further advances for women.

In its review of the Beijing Platform for Action's areas of concern, many of the less controversial issues are fairly identified and evaluated, such as women's access to land, property, and capital as crucial components of economic improvement for poor women: "Moving beyond access to microcredit and expanding women's access to a broad range of financial services, including appropriate and affordable savings and credit products, payment and money transfer services ... remains a significant challenge."¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the report also finds: "One of the most significant advances towards gender equality in the past two decades has been the increase in women and girls' educational enrolment."¹²

However, the Secretary-General's report is not immune to the feminists' single-minded focus on so-called sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR):

Maternal deaths, which are largely preventable, are linked to the low status of women and to inadequate health-care services, including the lack of emergency obstetric care services, low rates of skilled attendance at delivery and the persistent *denial of sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls* in many countries.¹³ (Emphasis added.)

This statement highlights a genuine problem and several effective solutions, but then takes a wrong turn. While preventable maternal deaths are linked to a lack of adequate emergency obstetric services and skilled birth attendants, maternal mortality is not similarly linked to the contentious and nebulous notions of SRHR—a term that has never been defined in any negotiated U.N. document. Furthermore, the report claims that "[u]nsafe abortion also constitutes a leading cause of maternal mortality,"¹⁴ citing a dubious study from the World Health Organization.¹⁵ In fact, increasing the legality and accessibility of abortion does not seem to improve maternal mortality¹⁶—which should come as no surprise, as abortion, by definition, does not make pregnancy and childbirth safer for mothers.

Toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Now, two decades after the seminal Beijing conference, radical feminists and their allies in U.N. bureaucracies still marginalize women's basic needs, focusing instead on SRHR, which, while still undefined by the U.N., encompasses liberal feminists' top priorities of unfettered access to abortion services,

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10. U.N. Economic and Social Council, "Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly," December 15, 2014, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2015/3&Lang=E (accessed May 12, 2015).
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 15/110, paragraph 48.
 12. *Ibid.*, paragraph 53.
 13. *Ibid.*, paragraph 83.
 14. *Ibid.*, paragraph 85.
 15. World Health Organization, *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2008*, 6th ed. (Geneva, 2011).
 16. For further explanation of why legalizing abortion does not improve maternal health, see Rebecca Oas and Stefano Gennarini, "The Unfinished Business of MDG 5 on [sic] Maternal Health and the Post-2015 Development Agenda," International Organizations Research Group *Briefing Paper* No. 13, July 7, 2014, pp. 4 and 9–13, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/cfam/wp-content/uploads/13-The-Unfinished-Business-of-MDG-5w.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2015).

meeting the manufactured “unmet need” for contraceptives,¹⁷ and “comprehensive sexuality education.” The subject of maternal mortality represents a current battleground for feminists in light of ongoing efforts to create the post-2015 development agenda, as the expiring Millennium Development Goals included a target—which has not been met—to dramatically reduce maternal mortality by 2015. The new SDGs will undoubtedly include new targets for reducing maternal mortality, and with it, the funds and attention of donor countries and organizations. However,

[r]esearch shows the sexual and reproductive health community devoted to implementing ICPD [International Conference on Population and Development issues] does not prioritize maternal health. They see maternal health only as one component in a broader agenda about power inequalities, fertility reduction, sexual autonomy, abortion, reproductive rights, and other contentious issues.¹⁸

Those who genuinely seek to improve women’s lives around the world ought to focus on concrete and measurable objectives¹⁹ that meet the real needs of women. These include: improving maternal and child mortality by investing in basic health care and trained birth attendants; combating human trafficking²⁰ and prostitution, which affects millions of women worldwide; and pursuing policies of economic freedom,²¹ which go a long way toward alleviating poverty for women and their families.

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17. For more on the allegedly unmet need for contraception, see Rebecca Oas, “The Totally Phony Notion of ‘Unmet Need’ for Contraception,” Center for Family and Human Rights, April 9, 2015, https://c-fam.org/friday_fax/phony-unmet-need-to-promote-population-control-programs-in-sdgs/ (accessed May 11, 2015), and Melton, “In Bed with Radical Feminists.”
 18. Oas and Gennarini, “The Unfinished Business of MDG 5,” p. 5.
 19. For further discussion of the importance of focusing on measurable improvements for women, particularly in the context of maternal mortality, and eliminating calls for normative changes in reproductive rights, see *ibid.*, p. 9.
 20. For information on how to combat trafficking, see Lisa Curtis and Olivia Enos, “Combating Human Trafficking in Asia Requires U.S. Leadership,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2995, February 26, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/02/combating-human-trafficking-in-asia-requires-us-leadership>.
 21. For the benefits of economic freedom, see 2015 *Index of Economic Freedom*, “Executive Highlights,” <http://www.heritage.org/index/book/executive-highlights>.
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