

reportback

Beijing +25 consultative forum

Generation Equality: Realising Women's Rights for an Equal Future

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abstract

In order to measure progress with the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), countries have to report back to the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) every five years. Country reports are compiled by national governments, but civil society plays an important role to expose discrepancies in country reports through shadow reports. Women's organisations and other stakeholders in the struggle for gender justice therefore act as a corrective to official views of the state of gender equality/justice in countries. Ilitha Labantu, a South African women's rights organisation, organised a South African consultative forum in 2020 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing conference and reflect on what progress has still to be made, particularly foregrounding the younger generation of feminist leadership in 2020. An objective of the gathering was to provide a forum for women to share their experiences of the struggle for gender equality across generations and to make recommendations on the six action coalitions identified by the Beijing +25 UN Generation Equality campaign to catalyse and drive action and new commitment to gender equality. The consultative meeting was held in preparation for the sixty fourth session of the United Nation's Convention on the Status of Women (UN CSW64), where civil society feedback and discussion were derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The reportback focusses on the meeting's deliberations on youth recommendations on the action coalition themes: gender-based violence; economic justice and rights; bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights; feminist action for climate change; technology and innovation for gender equality; and feminist movements and leadership, that will include handing over of the reins to a younger generation of feminists.

Recommendations included a greater space for the inclusion of a younger generation of feminists in the Beijing +25 processes through the use of modern digital technologies, a focus on intersectionality and tackling patriarchal attitudes that impede progress toward gender equality.

keywords

Beijing Platform of Action, Ilitha Labantu, civil society, UN Commission on the Status of Women, Beijing +25.

Introduction

A civil society consultative forum celebrating and reflecting on the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was held by Ilitha Labantu in collaboration with the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), African Women Independent Forum (AWIF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Bambanani for Social Development. The consultative forum entitled *Generation Equality: Realising Women's Rights for an Equal Future* was held at CPUT in February 2020. It brought together more than 100 women activists, think-tanks, private sector, faith-based organisations, academic institutions, Student Representative Councils (SRCs),

youth organisations, UN entities, independent experts and other key stakeholders. The objectives of the Beijing consultative forum were:

- Participants to share their experiences of the struggle for gender equality across generations;
- to reflect on the goals established to achieve such equality at a World Conference for Women held by the United Nations (UN) in Beijing in 1995 and the extent to which these had been achieved; and
- to prepare for the sixty fourth session of the United Nation's Convention on the Status of Women (UN CSW64) marking the celebration of Beijing +25.

UN CSW64 was set to be attended by about 10,000 women, but as a result of COVID-19 it was shortened to one day on 9 March and a follow-up event on 13 March. The only significant items of business possible at the conference, was adoption of a political declaration. CSW64 was to have been a crucial meeting and a major opportunity for civil society to shape the agenda and help sketch the blueprint for the actions to be taken over the next 10 years with the goal of ending gender inequality by 2030.

Civil society mobilisation and consultation on the Beijing +25 process has girded feminist activism at national, regional and international levels and fed into the process of reporting on the key challenges and achievements in meeting the Beijing objectives over the last 25 years. The reportback contributes to awareness-raising on the positioning by the 'youth generation' critical to intergenerational debate in South Africa, 25 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (UN 1995).

Ilitha Labantu celebrated its 30-year anniversary in 2019 and the consultative forum was intended to forge respect and a mutual agenda among older and younger generations of women activists. Through open, respectful and honest debate, the meeting sought to produce equal partnerships across generations and among civil society organisations, with the youth gaining greater understanding from the experience of the elders – and young and old learning from each other. The consultative forum sought to produce a new, age-appropriate narrative for the women's movement in South Africa, signifying unity and commitment to the cause of gender equality across generations.



Mandisa Monakali, founder of Ilitha Labantu, speaking at the Beijing +25 consultative forum

'No peace without women': Reflections on Beijing +25

During the panel discussion, Reflections on Beijing +25, Dr Litha Musiyimi Ogana, New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) gender advisor, reminded participants of women's demands for inclusion in global human rights deliberations and forums. The activism by women that culminated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995,

stemmed from earlier engagements in international UN meetings involving among others the Kenyan social campaigner Wangari Maathai. This group decided that the general absence of women at such meetings was unacceptable and so started to make their presence felt, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992; at the UN's World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, in 1993; and at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994. At the 1992 meeting, the intervention led to the acceptance of the principle that there can be no sustainable development without women; at Vienna, it was agreed that women's rights are human rights; and the Cairo document emphasised the importance of gender equality and reproductive rights. It was subsequently agreed by the UN that there can be no peace without women. These in-principle declarations were reached in the teeth of significant opposition.

She said that the solidarity forged among women around the Beijing conference made them a force that could not be easily divided. Deploying a number of strategies, including the production of shadow reports in the face of official intransigence and apportioning their efforts to introduce women's issues in a wide range of policy documents, these women became increasingly visible.

From Beijing to Beijing +25

Panelist Jacqueline Utamuriza-Nzisabira, UN Women East and Southern Region, stated that the Beijing +25 priorities for southern Africa for the next five years, 2020–2025, adopted by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in line with those at the continental and global levels, are to end violence against women and eradicate poverty, which disproportionately affect women. Underpinning these priorities is the key goal: change social norms. At the continental level, African governments agreed a Political Declaration on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the 2019 meeting in Addis Ababa, which has established nine priorities for Africa, informed by priorities set by SADC.

Beijing +25 Africa Declaration – Africa's Nine Priorities

1. Eliminate all discriminatory laws, practices, negative stereotypes and social norms that are based on culture and not aligned to international and constitutional commitments to human rights;
2. Invest in education, training, science and technology for women and girls to promote their equal access to employment and eliminate occupational segregation;
3. Strengthen and reposition gender machineries as key drivers for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with appropriate capacity and resources to deliver on their mandates;
4. Improve and scale-up social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls;
5. Implement the women, peace and security agenda, UN Security Council resolution 1325 and related resolutions;
6. Eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls as a prerequisite for gender equality and women's empowerment;
7. Invest in and ensure meaningful participation of women and girls in productive sectors, particularly agribusiness and agricultural value chains, to increase wealth and reduce poverty;
8. Close sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive statistical and analytical gaps to ensure gender-responsive planning, budgeting and monitoring of the 2030 [UN Sustainable Development Goals] Agenda and 2063 [African Union The Africa We Want] Agenda; and

9. Accelerate the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 on universal health and well-being for all, to reduce the prevalence of disease in women and girls, and to mitigate the disproportionate burden of care affecting women.

Source: UN Women 2019

CSW64 was to have been followed by two meetings in Mexico City on 7-8 May and in Paris on 7-10 July 2020. The plan was that a global Generation Equality Forum would be established and finalised at these two large-scale meetings. The idea behind creating this forum was that all women, young and old alike, should come together on this intergenerational and intersectional body in pursuit of gender equality. No women were to be left behind.

A key aspect of the UN's planning process for the Generation Equality Forum is to produce actions and accountability that include civil society engagement in both setting and enacting the agenda for this initiative. Opportunities for civil society to affect the agenda – before this was formalised in Paris – were planned. Civil society was to have played a key role in producing the roadmaps for six “action coalitions” to be established as triple-helix partnerships with government and business partners, as well as other stakeholders, to accelerate action in critical areas of concern. Specifically, these coalitions are supposed to mobilise governments, civil society and the private sector to catalyse collective action and spark global conversations among generations. It has been proposed that two of the six coalition may be rolled out in Africa, in Senegal and South Africa. Six themes with the highest potential to be achieved have been selected as the focus for these coalitions, which will develop and seek to implement a set of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality in these areas.

Six Generation Equality Coalition Themes Each Led by an Individual Country

1. Gender-Based Violence;
2. Economic Justice and Rights;
3. Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights;
4. Feminist Action for Climate Change;
5. Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality;
6. Feminist Movements and Leadership.

Source: UN Women 2020

The Generation Equality Coalitions call for intergenerational mentoring. The themes centre on the life opportunities of adolescent girls, while they also have clear impacts for all women. In pursuing their particular goals, the action coalitions may need to: leverage financing for maximum impact; attend to issues of intersectional discrimination; transform gender norms; reform laws and policies; produce gender data for accountability; and foster systemic change.

Utamura-Nzisabira emphasised that it is crucial that South African women ensure that their reality is reflected in the blueprints adopted for the Generation Equality Forum and its action coalitions, particularly if they are seeking to be supported in their work. In this regard, South Africa should play an active role in participation in the meetings and forums. For example, the SADC presence at the African Union (AU) meeting last year at which the Political Declaration was produced ensured that health and HIV/AIDS would be on the agenda and in the document – none of the other regions mentioned this issue.



Delegates to the Beijing +25 Consultative Forum

Voices of youth – A new generation’s engagement in gender equality

Panelists Anne Githuku-Shongwe (UN Women) and Mmabatho Ramagoshi (Ministry of Women), stated that the 1995 Beijing meeting became synonymous with women’s empowerment and radicalisation and laid the groundwork for a new era of women’s activism. In part as a result of this new priorities have emerged. For example, the kinds of conversation that are now being held around Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI), which should be inter-generational, were not even on the agenda at that time. In addition, the progress on women’s emancipation since Beijing has only been partial. Against this background, the idea of “generation equality” being promoted by the UN aims to bring together the older and younger generations in the belief that gender equality can be achieved while reflecting on the progress that has and has not been made over the past 25 years. The campaign for generation equality has adopted the life experience of adolescent, 15-year-old girls in all their diversity as the means for delivering its message.

In order to build on and contribute to the UN Generation Equality initiative, breakaway groups at the consultative forum considered and reported back on themes which have been chosen as the focus for six ‘action coalitions’ which will be established as part of the world body’s Beijing +25 programme. Under each of the six themes, a few “actions” or interventions are identified which have the potential to produce concrete, measurable results; and global support will be galvanised around these actions under the advocacy of the head of the state delegated to lead the particular action coalition with the support of a number of other states.

This agenda should be informed, from the South African side, by a process of national consultation. Forums and debates must be held at the country level. Accordingly, the national government has written to premiers to produce provincial plans for the next decade and will hold them to account for implementing these. Monitoring and evaluation led by joint government and civil society task teams will need to be put in place to assess the country’s progress at the national and provincial levels on implementing gender equality plans. In addition, popular engagement in and support for the UN Generation Equality initiative may be fostered by establishing large public forums connected to and streaming the events at the international conferences as they happen. South Africa, which has been asked to co-ordinate the SADC response to the international programme, may also seek to use new technology to connect spaces among the countries in the bloc in order to foster a regional response. Such efforts to create vibrant activities around, and popular interest in, the Generation Equality initiative should be driven by provincial leadership and influential civil society organisations. Suggested opportunities for civil society engagement in the generation equality initiative through popular participation have included: holding sports events – such as women’s football matches among the SADC countries; setting up chat groups; establishing fan parks, such as

those which were created during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, to air the key debates at the meetings.

The breakaway groups considered the achievements that had been recorded in the six coalition areas, the challenges that continue to be faced and the shorter- and longer-term kinds of action that may be prioritised to address these. The recommendations of the consultative forum were derived from these breakaway discussions.

Youth Coalition Themes Recommendations

General

- Explicit efforts need to be made to engage the younger generation of feminists in the Beijing +25 process. In particular, the Beijing generation should leverage new communication technologies to create platforms for passing on their knowledge and experience, as well as the lessons to be learnt from key historical events such as the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Beijing meeting in 1995.
- Modern technologies should be employed to reach out and communicate the messages and activism produced by the Beijing +25 process at the grassroots level.
- Feminist intersectionality needs to be promoted as a strategy to ensure no one is left behind in the Beijing +25 process. To this end the definitions of gender employed must go beyond the binary framework adopted at Beijing.
- Recent attacks on those defending women's human rights should be acknowledged and the Beijing +25 process should recognise their achievements and pledge solidarity with their cause.
- Campaigns to promote women's emancipation and create gender-equal communities need to be forged through increased co-ordination between women's rights institutions and civil society organisations.
- A clear set of measures to tackle patriarchal attitudes preventing women's full access to rights should be defined, adequately funded and implemented.
- Civil society should co-ordinate with policy makers to ensure that all international treaties, conventions and resolutions relating to women's rights are agreed, domesticated and implemented.
- Leveraging South Africa's chairing of the AU, government and civil society stakeholders should look to hosting large-scale events commemorating and reflecting on the end of the Africa Women's Decade.
- A 25-year review of the progress made in implementing South Africa's Women's Charter of 1954 should be conducted.
- Consultation should be initiated on establishing a National Women's Development Agency which would seek to advance the economic empowerment of women.
- Civil society organisations should co-ordinate appropriate platforms for analysing government departmental finances and evaluating these in terms of gender-responsive budgeting.
- Partnerships should be established with institutes of higher learning to produce gender-based research that can benchmark the extent of women's emancipation and the effectiveness of programmes to promote this; to co-ordinate actions and campaigns in relation to combating gender-based violence; and to curate archives on the history of the women's liberation movement.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

- The relevant laws protecting women should be properly implemented across the criminal justice system. To this end, the police should be better trained and more women officers should be recruited to provide appropriate support to victims/ survivors

reporting cases of GBV. In addition, Thuthuzela Care Centres should be fully equipped and properly funded.

- Consciousness-raising and awareness campaigns to promote greater public understanding of the causes and impacts of GBV should be implemented. Empowerment programmes and training for women to help them combat GBV should also be rolled out.
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to ensure that the present legislation protecting women is appropriate and is being implemented properly.
- Broad measures should be crafted and implemented to prevent discrimination against women in general, which could include producing culturally and religiously appropriate campaigns to foster a more tolerant society that recognises and supports women's rights.
- School curricula should include modules on basic human rights including gender equality, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). In addition, inclusive education that does not promote gender roles should be introduced.
- Public education on sexual and reproductive rights should be promoted and accompanied by efforts to make SHRH services more democratically available in order to help prevent incidents of gender-based violence.
- A national femicide conference could be held to discuss the issue of GBV across a broader spectrum.
- A separate budget should be established to fund the efforts to combat GBV.

Economic justice and rights

- Sustained inclusive economic growth, equal employment opportunities and decent work for all women should be delivered to address the structural exclusion of women from the economy. There should be equity in earnings between men and women for work of equal value, addressing the pay gap.
- Implementation and enforcement of laws such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, (PEPUDA or the Equality Act, Act No. 4 of 2000) which promote equitable economic engagement for women, should be prioritised.
- Partnerships should be established with financial institutions to support women entrepreneurs, in particular by improving women's access to credit and to land.
- Leadership and skills training should be undertaken to promote women's economic empowerment. In this regard, inclusive and equitable quality education and training opportunities and career paths need to be made available to women and girls.
- There should be gender equity in ownership, management and decision making across all sectors of the economy. At the local level, inclusive programmes that address issues of intersectionality and the status of women in their communities should be tailored according to circumstances to produce economic empowerment.
- Strict measures should be taken to assess and verify ownership of companies by women and other designated groups before awarding government tenders to prevent fronting.

Bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights

- Greater efforts should be made to facilitate greater and more democratic access to SRHR services, including people with disabilities and members of the LGBTIQ+ community. Social services should be transformed to make them more gender responsive.
- Women should be empowered through economic and poverty eradication programmes, so that they are more independent and less reliant on their partners.
- The challenge of socialisation which produces fixed gender stereotypes and thus continues to discriminate against women should be comprehensively addressed. For example, action may be taken to support trans people, who face particular prejudice,

in asserting their constitutional right to be identified as they wish, regardless of the gender marker that may have been assigned to them at birth.

- Public campaigns need to be mounted to highlight how many young people are effectively being forced into transactional sex due to an absence of alternative ways of making their way in the world, and to combat the human trafficking that can result.
- There is an urgent need for comprehensive sex education in schools which covers all issues of sexual and reproductive choice and rights and bodily autonomy.

Feminist action for climate change

- Laws and policies, and private industry activities, should be aligned with the targets and principles expressed by the SDGs. Ministers with energy and environment portfolios should understand the threat posed by climate change and seek to forge and implement policies accordingly.
- Women should be granted greater access to land and provided with the resources to work it in sustainable ways. Women should also play a greater, more inclusive role in environmental decision-making processes.
- Public education campaigns should be launched to promote greater popular understanding of climate change. These should focus on recycling, reusing and reducing the use of resources; producing new forms of environmental risk and water management; promoting green living in urban areas; producing new, green initiatives in rural areas; fostering the spread of backyard gardens; and investing in solar power.

Technology and innovation for gender equality

- International and national goals supporting women's leading role in the technology sector should be promoted, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which aims to bridge the digital divide; the priorities established by the AU's Agenda 2063 The Africa We Want blueprint to produce a more knowledgeable society; and national government priorities for women to lead technological development;
- A gender lens should be used to identify the global development challenges facing women in particular and what kind of technological, economic and social innovations may be forged to address these.
- Innovative economic models and solutions should be developed to empower women, foster greater gender equality and address the continuing challenge of women's unpaid work as carers.
- Women should be recruited to an increasing number of leadership positions within the technology sector.
- Access to the latest technological tools should be promoted for women, especially those with disabilities and women living in poverty.
- Government decision-makers should produce improved policies and implement these to protect women from cyber violence and make the internet a safer space for women, girls, and women's rights organisations. Such work would entail producing a workable legal definition of cyber violence against women.
- Training should be cascaded on how to spot and respond to online violence, including by leveraging current rules as well as by leveraging the technology and online communities to combat such harassment. To this end, data should be collected and produced in a clear, accessible form to reveal the extent and kind of online violence and map the lack of gender sensitivity of sites.

Feminist movements and leadership

- The gains made by women's empowerment and gender equality (WEGE) legislation, including in the form of constitutional, legal and policy advances, should be implemented and such implementation should be monitored to ensure its effectiveness.
- Campaigns to promote awareness of, and support for, women's rights should be continually mounted. The modus operandi should be to work collaboratively to

generate synergies for social change, emphasising a human rights approach as a common platform that provides solidarity.

- Feminist leaders should adopt an intersectional approach, bringing together the various parts of the women's movement, including indigenous women; women with disabilities; and the LGBTIQ community, and engaging them on how Beijing +25 is important in their lives.
- The push-back against women in decision making should be resisted and the number of women in parliament and decision-making spaces across all sectors should be increased. Gender parity should be institutionalised to ensure equal participation for women and their empowerment through comprehensive access to justice, education and health services.
- The women's movement should seek to transform the sustainable development of capacity, empowerment and understanding on the individual level into a broader drive towards collective action. Grassroots activism should be fostered as a unique pool of women leaders with the capacity to transform and produce new values and initiatives, demand accountability and new kinds of long-term partnerships within the movement.
- There should be greater space for young women activists, as has been demonstrated by their role in climate change campaigns. These young women should be mentored, including by Beijing feminists who should continue to inspire and nurture them.
- The longer-term priorities for the movement must include improving the quality of education at all levels which should feature modules on land rights, gender equality, patriarchy and Pan-Africanism as part of the history syllabus.
- Feminists in South Africa should reconnect with women in other countries in the southern African region and the continent, and seek to build on South Africa's role as chair of the AU and a temporary member of the UN Security Council by hosting a conference and celebration to commemorate the end of the Africa Women's Decade.
- A national feminist summit should be convened to plot the path ahead for the movement to emancipate women; and special forums on women's leadership should be held at the municipal level to address specific local challenges.

Conclusion

The consultative forum building on Ilitha Labantu's history of engagement in gender equality organisation work at the international level, reflected on the importance of global, African and South African efforts to liberate women since 1995 and the lessons that may be learnt from these.

The importance of civil society consultation was emphasised by participants. Civil society activists have a responsibility to address the shortfalls in official planning in relation to gender, including in the National Development Plan, and align policies with the 12 priorities established by the Beijing Plan for Action, as well as the rubric of South Africa's Constitution. Such reformed policy should also be cascaded to provincial and municipal levels, where greater engagement by civil society is also required.

It was recommended that Ilitha Labantu should engage with the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities to present the recommendations from the consultative forum and to ensure that these are channelled to the relevant bodies and departments.

Note

1. The report has been shortened for publication. The full report on the consultative meeting is available at: <https://www.ilithalabantu.org.za/>

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ILITHA LABANTU, established in 1989, is a social service and educational organisation that focuses on addressing violence against women and children and supporting those affected by it. <https://www.ilithalabantu.org.za/>