

Issues and Challenges of Women's Rights

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Abstract

Women's rights, as a term, typically refers to the freedoms inherently possessed by women and girls of all ages, which may be institutionalized, ignored or illegitimately suppressed by law, custom, and behaviour in a particular society. These liberties are grouped together and differentiated from broader notions of human rights because they often differ from the freedoms inherently possessed by or recognized for men and boys, and because activism surrounding this issue claims an inherent historical and traditional bias against the exercise of rights by women. Issues commonly associated with notions of women's rights include, though are not limited to, the right: to bodily integrity and autonomy; to vote (universal suffrage); to hold public office; to work; to fair wages or equal pay; to own property; to education; to serve in the military; to enter into legal contracts; and to have marital, parental and religious rights. In this research paper I have discussed issues and challenges of women rights and also review the role of different international agencies in spreading awareness about women's rights.

Keywords: ignored, inferior, weak, discrimination, equality and opportunity

1. Introduction

Today, women in most nations, can vote, own property, work in many different professions, and hold public office. These are some of the rights of the modern woman. But women have not always been allowed to do these things. They and their supporters have waged and in some places continue to wage long campaigns to win the same rights as men and be viewed as equals in society.

Most early peoples considered women to be inferior to, or less than, men. Through laws and mythology (stories describing beliefs), the view that women were weak was passed on from one generation to the next. However, some ancient

civilizations knew powerful women. For example, Queen Hatshepsut ruled Egypt as a mighty Pharaoh in the 15th century BC.

As time progressed, most women still enjoyed few, if any, rights. Their futures tended to be tied to the fortunes of their husbands or other male relatives. Yet even in periods dominated by men, some women became extraordinary leaders. For example, Queen Elizabeth I ruled England for 45 years, beginning in 1558. She became so influential that the era was named for her; during the Elizabethan Age, England emerged as a world power. Similarly, Catherine the Great ruled over 15th-century Russia.

During the late 1700s, in a time called the

Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, some free-thinking women began planting the seeds of change. For example, in 1792 English author Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She boldly proposed that women receive the same opportunities as men in education, work, and politics.

2. Importance of Women's Rights

Human rights reflect the moral conscience of the world and the highest common aspiration that everyone should live in liberty, free from want and fear. So, human rights can be seen as a global vision backed by state obligations. The term human rights refers to those rights that have been recognized by the global community and protected by international legal instruments.

Human rights for women, as for all individuals, are protected in the tenets of international law and international conferences provide the opportunity for governments to make, or repeat, declarations of commitment. For example, the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing during 1995 reflects the commitment made by governments in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, that "the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights".

A Declaration is an important first step but does not automatically change practice. According to a leading lawyer, Catherine MacKinnon, 'Human rights principles are based on experience, but the experiences have not been those of women. What most often happens to women escapes the human rights net. Whether in peacetime or in war, at home or abroad, in private or in public, by our side or by the other side, man's inhumanity to woman is ignored.

Consequently, women world-wide continue to suffer violations of their rights. The causes and consequences may differ from country to country, but prejudices and discrimination against women continue to be widespread and involve the full range of human rights violations known to the modern world. But women and the girl child face additional human rights violations solely or primarily because of their sex. This fact is recognized at the highest levels of world leadership. The UN Secretary-General in 2006 stated that the issue of women's and

girl's rights remain a priority for the United Nations and the international community.

Important steps towards protecting women's human rights world-wide include documenting human rights violations, publicizing these violations as widely as possible and campaigning to press government authorities to use all mechanisms available to secure an end to the abuses. Governments which fail to protect fundamental human rights should be confronted with the full force of international condemnation.

To hold states accountable for their performance with relation to global human rights standards is not to impose the value system of anyone part of the world or another but to refer to universal values based on the distilled knowledge and wisdom of all our cultures. The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights attended by 171 states in 1993 agreed, 'the universal nature of these rights and freedom is beyond question.' The central factor is all human rights are UNIVERSAL, INDIVISIBLE and INTER-RELATED.

Human rights are not just about liberty and freedoms but also about equality, equity and Justice. Another milestone advance was made when the World Summit for Social Development recognized that the enjoyment of human rights was a fundamental basis for social development. Securing the realization of women's human rights on a basis of equality with men is now seen as an essential pre-requisite for sustainable development.

The subject of human rights touches upon every aspect of human endeavour and aspiration. Human rights are inherent. Every man, woman and child is entitled to enjoy his or her human rights simply by nature of being human.

3. Women and Violence

Gender-based violence — in various forms including rape, domestic violence, "honour" killings and trafficking in women — exacts a heavy toll on mental and physical health. Increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights.

Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way — most often by someone she knows, including by her husband or another male family member; one woman in

four has been abused during pregnancy.

Millions of women require medical attention or otherwise suffer the impact of gender-based violence; fear of violence inhibits discussion and constrains the health choices and life opportunities of many millions more.

“Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms ... In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture.” (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, paragraph 112.)

Gender-based violence both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. It encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices. Anyone of these abuses can leave deep psychological scars, damage the health of women and girls in general, including their reproductive and sexual health, and in some instances, results in death.

Violence against women has been called “the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world”. Accordingly, the Vienna Human Rights Conference and the Fourth World Conference on Women gave priority to this issue, which jeopardizes women’s lives, bodies, psychological integrity and freedom. Violence may have profound effects — direct and indirect — on a woman’s reproductive health, including:

- Unwanted pregnancies and restricted access to family planning information and contraceptives.
- Unsafe abortion or injuries sustained during a legal abortion after an unwanted pregnancy.
- Complications from frequent, high-risk pregnancies and lack of follow-up care.
- Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.
- Persistent gynecological problems.
- Psychological problems.

Gender-based violence also serves — by intention or effect — to perpetuate male power and control. It is sustained by a culture of silence

and denial of the seriousness of the health consequences of abuse. In addition to the harm they exact on the individual level, these consequences also exact a social toll and place a heavy and unnecessary burden on health services. Psychological abuse almost always accompanies physical abuse. In addition, one third to one half of all cases involve sexual abuse. A high proportion of women who are beaten are subjected to violence repeatedly.

Violence against women is a pervasive yet under-recognized human rights violation. Accordingly, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, gave priority to this problem.

3.1 Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is the most common form of gender-based violence. In every country where reliable, large-scale studies have been conducted, between 10 and 69 per cent of women report they have been physically abused by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

Most domestic violence involves male anger directed against their women partners. This gender difference appears to be rooted in the way boy and men are socialized - biological factors do not seem to account for the dramatic differences in behaviour in this regard between men and women.

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. Some husbands become more violent during the wife’s pregnancy, even kicking or hitting their wives in the belly. These women run twice the risk of miscarriage and four times the risk of having a low birth-weight baby.

Cross-cultural studies of wife abuse have found that nearly a fifth of peasant and small-scale societies are essentially free of family violence. The existence of such cultures proves that male violence against women is not the inevitable result of male biology or sexuality, but more a matter of how society views masculinity.

3.2 Rape

The need to provide redress to abused women is urgent. For Instance, in India, Close to the heels of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence bill becoming an act, this is what was happening behind closed doors, Rape. In 2004, 525 rape cases were reported. In 14 such incidents, the perpetrator was the father of the

victim. In 6 cases, it was the stepfather of the victim. In 39 cases the rapists were relatives.

Kirti Singh points out that the laws relating to sexual assault in India have not been changed or amended since the introduction of the Indian Penal Code in 1860, with the exception of certain amendments that came in 1983. The law continues to be both archaic and patriarchal. In 1983, the laws relating to rape were extensively amended, mainly due to intense and widespread movements by women's organizations to bring about law reforms in this area.

3.3 Human Trafficking

Reports of trafficking in women come from nearly every world region. The greatest number of victims are believed to come from Asia (about 250,000 per year), the former Soviet Union (about 100,000), and from Central and Eastern Europe (about 175,000). An estimated 100,000 trafficked women have come from Latin America and the Caribbean, with more than 50,000 from Africa. War, displacement, and economic and social inequities between and within countries, and the demand for low-wage labour and sex work drive this illicit trade in women.

Trafficking in persons — the illegal and highly profitable recruitment, transport, or sale of human beings into all forms of forced labour and servitude, including trafficking into forced marriage — is a tragic and complex human rights abuse. Women are particularly vulnerable to this slavery-like practice, due largely to the persistent inequalities they face in status and opportunity worldwide.

4. Social Evils

4.1 Child Marriage

Most countries have declared 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage. Despite the sanctions on child marriage, these continue. While the practice has decreased globally over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas and among the poorest of the poor. Impoverished parents often believe that child marriage will protect their daughters. In fact, it results in lost development opportunities, limited life options and poor health.

Child marriage is a health issue as well as a human rights violation. Because it takes place almost exclusively within the context of poverty and gender inequality, it also has social, cultural

and economic dimensions.

Married adolescents have been neglected from the global adolescent reproductive health agenda because of the incorrect assumption that their married status ensures them a safe passage to adulthood.

Teenage brides with much older husbands often have limited capacity to negotiate sexual relations, use of contraception and childbearing, as well as other aspects of domestic life.

Data on spousal age differences show that adolescent girls' husbands are often considerably older. Research from 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa indicates husbands of 15-19-year-old girls are on average at least 10 years older than their wives.

4.2 Women and the Right to Life and to Be Born

According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) up to 50 million girls and women are missing from India's population as a result of systematic gender discrimination in India. In most countries in the world, there are approximately 105 female births for every 100 males.

In India, there are less than 93 women for every 100 men in the population. The accepted reason for such a disparity is the practice of female infanticide in India, prompted by the existence of a dowry system which requires the family to pay out a great deal of money when a female child is married. For a poor family, the birth of a girl child can signal the beginning of financial ruin and extreme hardship.

However, this anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families. Much of the discrimination is to do with cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms themselves must be challenged if this practice is to stop.

Diagnostic teams with ultrasound scanners which detect the sex of a child advertise with catch lines such as spend 600 rupees now and save 50,000 rupees later. The implication is that by avoiding a girl, a family will avoid paying a large dowry on the marriage of her daughter. According to UNICEF, the problem is getting worse as scientific methods of detecting the sex of a baby and of performing abortions are improving.

According to Ammu Joseph the most dramatic drop in the child sex ratio seems to have taken place in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra, where clinics

specializing in sex determination and sex selective abortions are known to have been in existence for at least a couple of decades. (Doing away with daughters The Hindu 9 December 2001)

4.3 Women and Economic Rights

According to Inter Press Service, "On a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80 per cent of basic food stuff. In Asia, they account for around 50 per cent of food production. In Latin America, they are mainly engaged in subsistence farming, horticulture, poultry and raising small livestock."

Yet women often get little recognition for that. In fact, many go unpaid. It is very difficult for these women to get the financial resources required to buy equipment etc., as many societies still do not accept, or realize, that there is a change in the "traditional" roles.

5. Women's Rights

The above mentioned status of women has often been questioned by social reformers and protesters in every age. The question of equal status of women received particular attention in twentieth century. Many countries enacted legislations recognizing women's right to be equal citizens, to participate in social and political activities. Right to vote, which was denied to women even in long established democracies was slowly granted to them in one after the other country. After the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly the question of denial of equality to women and recognition of their right gained particular momentum. In years to come important international norms concerning women's rights were drawn up by the Commission of Status of Women and adopted by the General Assembly.

Based on this some of the important conventions adopted by the UN. are as given below.

5.1 Convention on the Political Rights of Women

This convention was adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December, 1952. The convention recognizing that every one has the right to take part in the government of his/her country directly or indirectly through freely chosen representatives and has the right to equal access to public service in his/her country, and desiring to equalize the status of men and women in the

enjoyment and exercise of political rights declares:

- 1) Women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination.
- 2) Women shall be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies established by national law, on equal terms with men and discrimination.
- 3) Women shall be entitled to hold public office and to exercise all public functions, established by national law, on equal terms with men, without any discrimination.

5.2 Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957)

This convention was adopted in view of the conflicts arising in law in practice with reference to provision concerning the loss or acquisition of nationality by women as a result of marriage, of its dissolution or change of nationality by husband. The Convention recognizes that "every one has the right to a nationality" and that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Based on the above the Convention declares that Women's nationality shall not be automatically effected either due to marriage or its dissolution. Similarly, it will not be automatically changed due to change of nationality by husband. In other words, women has the right to retain or change her nationality independent of that of husband.

5.3 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age of Marriage and Registration of Marriage (1962)

This Convention is based on Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states:

- 1) Men and Women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and its dissolutions.
- 2) Marriage shall be entered into with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

In view of the above the Convention provides:

- 1) No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties.
- 2) States shall take legislative action to specify a minimum age of marriage.

3) All marriages shall be registered in an appropriate official register by the competent authority.

6. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Since the mid-1970s United Nations has been particularly active with regard to rights of women. One aspect of this has been adoption in 1979 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women as a core Human Rights Conventions.

As with the other major international human rights instruments, the Convention provided for the establishment of a Committee to consider the progress made in the implementation of the Convention. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women consists of 23 independent experts, elected by the States parties from among their nationals. At present, the Committee is authorized only to consider reports submitted by States parties, as no mechanism exists for the consideration of complaints from States or from individuals, although the World Conference on Human Rights, held at Vienna in 1993, had proposed the adoption of an optional protocol authorizing it to receive communications from individuals.

In its annual report submitted to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council, the Committee can request the United Nations to conduct studies either directly or indirectly on important aspects of women's rights. The Committee's reports are also transmitted for information to the Commission on the Status of Women.

The definition of discrimination against women as found in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is more detailed than the definitions found in other instruments which are more general in scope. The Convention forbids any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality by men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. The importance of this definition lies in the fact that the States which have ratified the Convention are required to evaluate the results of their measures and policies on the basis of the progress made in the prevention of

discrimination. None the less, inequalities can persist in practice despite the existence of laws and regulations intended to guarantee equality under the law. Therefore, the States parties to the Convention are invited to take special measures to establish de facto equality, while ensuring that these measures are non-discriminatory. The States parties are required to establish education programmes aimed at eliminating gender bias the stereotypes and to take other measures to eliminate practices which are detrimental to women or place them at a disadvantage in relation to men. In its General Recommendation No. 5, the Committee on the Elimination of discrimination against women reaffirmed the importance of special measures to advance women's integration into all aspects of civil society. For education, politics, the economy and employment in particular, these measures may be temporary according to the degree of equal access.

While the above mentioned international conventions are devoted to specific aspects of the rights of women, many other instruments also do take care of these. In fact, all the bodies established to monitor the implementation of various instruments of Human Rights are authorized to consider questions of discrimination on the basis of sex which arise in the exercise of the rights guaranteed. In addition conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) also mention important measures of protection against discriminatory labour practices which place women in an inferior position in the workforce. Thus, at least in international human rights convention system much has been adopted for promotion of women's equality and rights. How far these are implemented is a different question.

7. Concerns for Women's Rights

As mentioned above promotion and protection of women's rights has been a special concern for international community, more so since the mid 1970s. Accordingly a number of initiatives have been taken over the years for the advancement of women both by bodies created under the U.N. Charter and by others created under international instruments.

7.1 International Women's Year and World Conference 1975

Year 1974 was celebrated by the U.N. as International Women's Year. In this year Economic and Social Council of the U.N.

established a voluntary fund. This fund later became the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), whose mandate is to identify and study trends and attitudes which present obstacles for women and to suggest promotional, educational and other measures designed to mitigate those problems. The year culminated in holding of World Conference in Mexico City in 1975.

7.2 Mexico World Conference

Mexico World Conference adopted the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace. The Declaration and the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year, appended to the Declaration, dealt with a number of important issues. They focused essentially, however, on the underdevelopment of socio-economic structures in most areas of the world as the major cause of women's inferior position. The Plan outlines nine specific areas for national action, focusing primarily on equality of opportunity, in education and employment and equality of remuneration and social benefits. Recommendations were also made as to various policies which could usefully be implemented at the regional and international levels.

7.3 U.N. Decade for Women (1976-1985) and World Conference

Following the World Conference of the International Women's Year in 1975 the United Nations proclaimed 1976-1985 as the U.N. Decade for Women. Apart from other activities during the decade was held the world Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, in Copenhagen in 1980 around the themes of equality, development in the status of women. In the same year, the General Assembly adopted the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade, in which it emphasized the importance of women as both agents and beneficiaries of the development process.

7.4 Nairobi Conference (1986)

The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies were based on the principle that an essential contribution to the strengthening of international peace and security would be made by the elimination of all forms of inequality between women and men and by the integration of women into the development process. Great

weight was given to the fundamental importance of national means of implementing the proposed policies, and Governments were requested to allocate resources and to establish or reinforce mechanisms to promote the full integration of women in all aspect of civil life in their countries.

The Economic and Social Council approved both the contents of the programme and the thrust of the implementation measures. It entrusted the practical application of the programme to United Nations bodies, specialized agencies and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The Council also established within the United Nations system a reporting mechanism with the aim of monitoring, reviewing and appraising the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies.

In its review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, the Commission on the status of women noted a number of serious obstacles hindering the advancement of women and recommended steps to be taken to remove them. In relation to the de jure and de facto inequality which continued to exist between men and women, it recommended that countries should make efforts to make women more aware of their rights.

8. Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing 1995

8.1 The Conference

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing (China), was the largest gathering of government and non-governmental representatives even held with 17,000 persons in attendance. It produced a path-breaking document for advancing women's equity and equality, the Beijing Platform for Action. The Platform is an agenda for empowering women and furthering implementation of the 1986 Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. The Platform for Action sets time-specific targets for governments to eliminate discrimination in health, education, the workplace, decision making and the law, among other areas. The PFA identifies 12 critical areas of concern: poverty; education; health care; violence against women; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in power and decision making; institutional mechanisms; human rights of women; women and the media; women and the environment;

and the girl-child. NGOs played an active role in the Beijing negotiations and have been active in both national and international follow-up to the conference.

The goal of the special session was to produce a political declaration and an outcome document that reviewed progress, identified challenges, and adopted new actions to be taken for further implementation of the PFA. Text negotiations in the March 2000 preparatory committee (Prep Com) were laborious with marked differences within and between governmental negotiating blocs. At the conclusion, most text was still “bracketed”, or in dispute. As a result, delegates at the Prep Com continued to work in informal negotiations over five and a half weeks, right up until the beginning of the special session.

8.2 Key Outcomes

The Political Declaration reaffirms governments’ commitments and recognizes their primary responsibility in implementing the PFA, the Nairobi Forward looking Strategies, and the 12 critical areas of concern. It calls for continued international cooperation. It reaffirms the goal of universal ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against women and commits to strengthening and safeguarding a national and international enabling environment, including through the protection of human rights. Governments agreed to regularly assess PFA implementation, with a view to meeting in 2005 to consider new initiatives.

The document entitled “Further action and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action” is divided into (I) an introduction; (II) Achievement and obstacles in the implementation of the 12 critical areas of the PFA; (III) Current challenges affecting the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the PFA; and (IV) Actions and initiatives to overcome obstacles and to achieve the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Paragraph 2 of the introduction states that “the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms is essential to the empowerment of women. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and

protect human rights and fundamental freedoms.” PFA implementation “is the sovereign responsibility of each state”.

In Section II of the document the different positions expressed by industrialized and developing countries on the impact of structural adjustment policies on women resulted in compromise language referring to “inappropriate design and application of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs)”. In the area of “sexual and reproductive rights”, this language as adopted in the five-year review of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+5), was rejected and replaced with “sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights of women”. Violence against women, where perpetrated or condoned by the state or its agents is named as a human rights violation and states are held accountable.

In Section III, issues referred to contact groups were political will and commitment, sexual and reproductive rights, reference to CEDAW, globalization, sanctions and human rights. Compromise language on the term “sexual rights” was agreed on as “empowering women to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality”. Safe sex was replaced with “curbing high-risk behaviour”.

Regarding globalization, paragraphs 29 and 30 of the section were much debated, particularly the linkage between globalization and SAPs and their negative impact on women. The final text affirms this linkage, as well as some negative impacts. A reference to labour standards was deleted as there are no universally- agreed standards. Language adopted refers to the high cost of external debt servicing due to SAPs, and declining terms of international trade as a set-back to development.

In Section IV there was debate over reference to the Beijing Conference report, which included reservations to the PFA. It was agreed that the report would be referenced once in the introduction. Other debated issues included good governance, health care and services, diversity, violence against women and the right to development.

The Platform for Action is an agenda for women’s empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the

obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace.

8.3 Beijing+5 and Future

Beijing+5 was a special session of the General Assembly entitled "women: 2000: Gender Equality, Development and peace for the Twenty-First Century", that took place in June 2000 at United Nations Head Quarters, New York. At that session governments reaffirmed their commitment to the goals of the 1995 Fourth World Conference and also adopted future actions and initiatives for the year 2000 and beyond.

No doubt in recent years there have clearly been some notable gains for women. Over the period, increased visibility in elected assemblies and state institutions, some closing of gender gaps in primary and to a lesser extent secondary school enrolment, a larger female presence in the labour market and in labour laws that cross international borders, and lower fertility rates are some of the changes world over. However, still a significant gap exists in gender equality which place limits on women's access to income, authority and power. There is no single explanation for various types of inequalities and in some cases discrimination. The fact is that gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in all societies and are reproduced through a variety of practices and institutions, including policy interventions. Such needs to be done both at national and international community level to remove inequalities and gaps. The first General Assembly of U.N. of this century the Millennium Summit in the United Nations Millennium Declaration contains values, principles and eight specific goals as an international agenda for the twenty first century. Goal 3 is "to promote gender equality and empower women". International community needs to live up to this declaration. Of course, civil society in general and women's movement in particular have to play important roles to get

expectations fulfilled.

9. Conclusion

Women's rights, as a term, typically refers to the freedoms inherently possessed by women and girls of all ages, which may be institutionalized, ignored or illegitimately suppressed by law, custom, and behaviour in a particular society. Human rights for women, as for all individuals, are protected in the tenets of international law and international conferences provide the opportunity for governments to make, or repeat, declarations of commitment. For example, the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing.

Every man, woman and child is entitled to enjoy his or her human rights simply by nature of being human. It is this UNIVERSALITY of human rights which distinguishes them from other types of rights such as citizenship or contractual rights. Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way. Violence against women is a pervasive yet under-recognized human rights violation.

Accordingly, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, gave priority to this problem. Domestic violence is the most common form of gender-based violence. In every country where reliable, large-scale studies have been conducted, between 10 and 69 per cent of women report they have been physically abused by an intimate partner in their lifetime. UNFPA's (United Nations Population Fund) work in the area of gender equality and women's empowerment is firmly grounded in international law. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an international bill of rights for women. The General Assembly adopted the Convention in December 1979, and as of 2004. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted at the September 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW).

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