

Title: The Girl Child at Beijing : Lost or Found ?
(Assessing Commitments of the 4th UN Conference on Women)

1. Girl children ornamented some of the events and activities organised by UNICEF and by NGOs at Beijing. Some of them -- including very young ones -- were articulate and blunt in stating their own needs and opinions. Why were they there ? Was it in recognition -- 20 years overdue -- of the real significance of their presence among adult women? Was the girl child finally found at the largest-ever UN conference -- or lost again ? The actual Beijing decisions provide, at best, an ambiguous answer.
2. The conference did formally recognise the "girl child" as an entity and a "category" within the term "woman." A full section of the Platform for Action (Chapter V, Section L) was given to her. Delegations from South nations saw to that. But it is uncertain whether the Beijing deliberations yielded either a genuine recognition of the actual investments that the girl child deserves, or a clear commitment to acting upon such recognition.
3. The Beijing Declaration mentions the girl child about 10 times, and children a couple of times. It expresses commitment to developing "the fullest potential of girls and women of all ages" (Pt.34) and acknowledges "age" as a barrier to enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, along with factors such as race, culture, religion, ethnicity, disability (Pt. 32). What it does not acknowledge is that most of the world's female people are in fact children. And this is the fault running through the entire platform for action. The implication is that the Beijing decisions fail in a critical way to be future-oriented.
4. Looking at the Global Framework chapter, one gets the impression that this may not be for lack of words, at least in that opening portion. Looking at the specific sectoral sections, especially that on health, and at the provisions for resource use, one realises that the echoes of the framework did not reach that far.
5. One test of a decision is to see whether it rests on identification of the most pivotal facts. One test of a commitment is to look at where the money will be spent, and who will get first call on resources. The Beijing platform for action does not quite pass these tests. The majority of "women"(female people) are poor citizens of the poorer countries, classified as deprived or backward, and young. About 40 per cent of them, worldwide and especially in the developing world, are children below 15 years of age.

Recognising that it is the equal rights struggles of women that led to the argument for "affirmative action," does the girl child not have a case for extra attention before she limps past puberty ?

6. It is a false argument to say that attention to the girl child militates against women's rights or dilutes the force and validity of women's demand for an equal share in development and power. If development policies and programmes for anybody's social, political, or economic transformation are to work, they surely



have to begin with identifying and undertaking foundation investments. If there must be a choice between investment in the below-6 female as opposed to the above-60 : where does wisdom lie ? Who is tomorrow's woman ? She is less than 10 years old.

7. Twenty years of "development for women" have gone by without anyone applying the litmus test of age to assess what was done to build women's potential by investing in the girls born in 1975, when the call for gender equity first sounded at Mexico, or in 1985 when the Forward-Looking Strategies were adopted at Nairobi. Those two decades of female births, and their greater relative importance to future change, has been neglected by default. And yet the last 20 years clearly show that if policy fails to see that the needs of women must first be met in welcomed birth, in infant care, in childhood opportunity, in girlhood dignity -- the Nairobi promise of looking forward is crippled.

8. Denial of rights begins not at 18, but at birth, or even before, and the impact of that early discrimination lasts a lifetime. This is where the Beijing decisions have taken only a half-step forward -- admitting that the constituency of women spans many age groups, confessing that early discrimination calls for early redressal, but failing to recommend due weightage to the relative importance of doing more for the young than for the whole.

9. Strategies must now move on perceptions beyond the gender scan; the facts argue for an age-scan of the gender issue. Obvious or not, this still awaits broad acceptance, and the women's movement itself must overcome the myopia it now shares with international and national policy-makers.

10. Recognition does not end with writing in "girl child" or "girls" in every paragraph that mentions women. That is not age-specific enough. Policy must recognise the sub-categories of age, and the needs of each. This is where the Beijing platform displays another congenital flaw. Where does it address the needs or rights of the infant female fighting to survive her first year of life ? The 0 to 5 age group ? The 6 to 10 group ? The 11 to 15 group ? They have different needs, their rights have to be fulfilled in relation to these; their survival and well-being call for different investments, each matched to their segment of development.

11. Too little of this seems to have figured in the processes of thinking out Beijing's objectives. That the development junta missed the point en route shows up as soon as provisions are cross-referenced. It is glaringly evident in the section on Health. The 1995 World Health report highlighted the grim prospects that face a baby girl born in one of the least developed countries (see annexure), where one sixth of total global occur each year. The platform for action mildly mentions some of this in the Girl Child section, but seems unable to suggest any specific measures. It calls on national governments to " develop and implement comprehensive policies, plans of action and programmes for the survival, protection, development and advancement of the girl child to promote and protect the full enjoyment of her human rights," and urges governments to make these plans "an integral part of the total development process."

But through the list of nine strategic objectives and 26 whole paragraphs, there is no recognition of what needs to be happen for each age block. In this section and in the one on health, nutrition is not worth more than a cursory mention, and female genital mutilation seems of far greater interest.

12. In reviewing both health and discrimination, the platform text lists many diseases and ailments afflicting women and girls, and acknowledges constraints to both preventive and curative care. But its reference to health hazards facing girl children has a bewildering focus on sexual and reproductive health, as also HIV/AIDS, and seems to forget the suffering and disproportionate death of female infants and girls below the puberty line. The dangers of early pregnancy and child-bearing recur repeatedly in the health and girl child paragraphs -- but in calling for improvements on overall survival and health needs -- that "comprehensive policy" -- the recommendations reveal no perception that the newborn girl infant, or even the female foetus, must jump the queue for human rights for women. The best it can do is to tell us that "an estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted as a result of childhood protein-energy malnutrition," and then ask nothing of governments but that they "provide public information on the removal of discriminatory practices against girls in food allocation, nutrition and access to health care." Presumably this action to meet the strategic objective (L.5) of eliminating discrimination in health and nutrition will be achieved as more and more girls go to bed hungry and ill, but well-informed. "Health and nutritional training as an integral part of literacy programmes and school curricula, starting at the primary level, for the benefit of the girl child," should surely do the rest."

13. The preoccupation with sexuality, sexual health, reproductive rights, is chronic to both sections. The ICPD-Cairo recommendation that "the educational and service needs of adolescents" must be met "to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality" gets honourable mention. No wonder that education and information on the physiology of reproduction is listed higher up the scale than nutrition education. What about the little girls who die of diarrhoea, or measles or marasmus? What about the little girls who grow up to be sickly child-mothers (15 million, says the platform), whose babies die of diarrhoea, or measles, or marasmus? Neither for women nor for girl children do the Beijing decisions promise better attention to general health.

14. Finally, the girl child did not make it, even in words, into the last section where actual resources and funding are considered. She makes her final exit in para 335, after getting listed for gender research studies. Having been loaded with prospects of education on social, economic and political issues (para 284) just a few pages before, she will probably be able to contribute to future analyses of her place in the world. For the present, she is nowhere mentioned in the final paragraphs on actual investment; by then the authors returned the wording to just "women".

15. Neither ICPD-Cairo nor Beijing appear to have been much concerned that most of the world's people, who are young and poor, are not included in agendas that begin

with an ignorance of their reality. Neither has succeeded in being forward-looking on much more than the control of numbers and the increase of reproductive knowledge. One hesitates to believe that sustainable development, or equity, can rest confidently on either or both of these. Practical action to solve actual difficulties might have been a better objective. But the largest grand conference of the decade is over. It is not expected of Habitat-II that it can redesign such faulty agendas.

16. There is a time in the life-cycle for each critical developmental input. If that time-slot is missed, the investment opportunity is lost, due to either Nature or Society -- or both. Care, nutrition, the first learning stimulation, the first socialisation -- denial of any or all at the right time can and does result in permanent damage or lost potential. Many later programme initiatives for women are nothing more than salvage measures -- and salvage is not always possible. The evidence of missed investments and lost opportunity is abundant in both survival and development information. Low birth-weight babies are both cause and effect, illiteracy and lack of primary education, low skills and low self-reliance, self-denial in the family and community, low social confidence and powerlessness -- they are all both cause and effect. Society has persisted in producing part-people. Beijing should have addressed this in the full range of its ramifications -- but it did not, and this its proposed solutions may be as lopsided as the problems are. Twenty years of inaction made the Beijing conference necessary. But it has not set the stage for the changes that are really needed.

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