Feminist Agenda from Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) 1995 to the Sustainable Development Goals 2015: A Step Forward or Two Steps Back?

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was realised at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, held in Beijing, China. After extensive consultations with a wide cadre of stakeholders present, 50 comprehensive strategy objectives under 12 umbrella themes, were agreed upon. These included women and poverty, education, health, the girl child, media, violence, economic decision-making, the environment, armed conflict, strengthening institutional mechanisms and the human rights of women. BPfA was the first widely accepted and formal recognition of the need to address the underlying causes of gender disparity.

Since BPfA, we have seen nations commit to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which in 2015 became the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs have 17 themes from hunger and poverty to a separate goal for gender equality - something, which was lacking in the MDGs.

Many feminist thinkers and activists, in Pakistan and internationally, have argued that BPfA seem visionary in comparison to the SDGs. The BPfA, despite its flaws, was considered a global commitment for multifaceted reform at the structural and institutional level for the emancipation and equality of women. It is believed that in comparison, the SDGs have taken away from a global commitment that was comprehensively gendered in its understanding and approach under the BPfA. The counter argument to that has been that the SDGs are more realistic in terms of focus and achievement. They have also been lauded as more encompassing taking into account wider issues including social, economic and environmental aspects.

Has a comprehensive and more gender focused commitment such as BPfA been overshadowed with the adoption of the SDGs? Have the SDGs watered-down the BPfA and taken the global focus away from the pertinent issue of women’s empowerment and equality? Alternatively, have the SDGs allowed for a more focused approach to addressing inequality and women’s empowerment?

This panel will attempt to explore how far, if at all, we have gotten since BPfA 1995 and SDGs 2015. Which, out of the two commitments, is more comprehensive, radical and if implemented properly, the catalyst for transformation in the lives of women. In terms of sustainability, this panel will explore how significant BPfA was in addressing the underlying causes of discrimination, violence and social attitudes towards women, and if significant, have the SDGs been able to maintain this and/or make up for any gaps that may have existed.

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