

# Women's rights are human rights: platform for action

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The strongest and most urgent international statement about women's rights emerged from the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in September 1995 in Beijing. This statement, referred to as the Platform for Action, represents an agenda to empower women in economic, social and political areas (United Nations, 1996a). Prompted by women from all over the world, UN delegates unanimously agreed that the rights of women and the girl child are an indivisible part of universal human rights.

A fundamental prerequisite for women and men to share power is that of recognizing women's rights as human rights (United Nations, 1996a). Often without recourse against violations of their rights, women find it difficult to overcome barriers to their advancement in society. Women may encounter obstacles to enjoyment of human rights because many people do not recognize those rights. Failure to identify human rights of women begins at an early age, with the girl child.

This paper discusses violence against women as a violation of their human rights and the philosophy behind this concept. The paper also covers the 1995 Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum held parallel to the UN women's conference. At the NGO forum, social workers held a symposium on human rights and violence against women, the first organized gathering of social workers held in conjunction with a UN conference. Finally, the paper explains the Platform for Action and what it means to international social work.

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### **Violence against women as violation of human rights**

The concept of human rights is one of the few moral visions ascribed to internationally. Although its scope is not universally agreed upon, it strikes deep chords of response among many. Promotion of human rights is a widely accepted goal and provides a useful framework for seeking redress of gender abuse. (Bunch, 1990: 486-7)

Yet, while the refrain of human rights extends to all parts of the world, it generally has overlooked improper acts against women (Bunch, 1995). For instance, men frequently subject women to physical and mental violence with only sparse reference to that violence being an offense against human rights. This maltreatment of women acts as a cultural and social mechanism by which the male dominates his victims (United Nations, 1996a). By dominating women through acts of violence, men belittle the inherent right of women to be treated with respect.

While nobody should tolerate physical and mental violence against women, many people fail to see the connection between this violence and human rights (Sullivan, 1995; Bunch, 1995). Violence against women transcends class and culture, occurs in private and public spheres and ultimately depreciates the health and status of women (United Nations, 1996a; Cook, 1994a). Clearly, to advance the cause of reducing violence against women, a connection to human rights plays a crucial role. Even among women's groups inclusion of women's rights into the umbrella of human rights has been a relatively new concept. With its Platform for Action announced at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995, UN delegates finally and decisively stated that the rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.

### **Background**

The first UN declarations on human rights did not encompass any rights specific to women. The following chronology of events illustrates the lengthy road to UN acceptance of women's rights as human rights.

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document promoted by Eleanor Roosevelt. In that document human rights referred to rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or

other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or status (United Nations, 1948). In spite its lofty ideals, the declaration made no specific effort to highlight women's rights.

*First World Conference on Women.* In 1975, the UN held its initial World Conference on Women in Mexico City (United Nations, 1976). For the first time, a UN conference linked the oppression of women to their inequality. Conference leaders urged governments to eliminate violence against women. Leaders also recognized that to improve the status of women, much needed to be accomplished. Therefore, the UN proclaimed the next ten years as the Decade of Women.

*Second World Conference on Women.* Five years after the first UN women's conference, the UN held its second conference on women in Copenhagen, Denmark. At this conference, UN delegates endorsed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations, 1980). That convention, commonly referred to as the 'Magna Carta' for the human rights of women, formed a bill of rights that established international standards for achieving equal rights of women (Wood-Wetzel, 1993). The convention identified inferior status and oppression of women as not merely a problem of inequality but also a means of perpetuating discrimination against women. The convention now serves as the international standard by which a UN member country obligates itself to eliminate political, economic, social and cultural discrimination against women. To obligate itself, a country must ratify the convention (Cook, 1994b). As of February 1996, 151 countries have ratified the convention, with the US being the only industrialized country not to have ratified it (United Nations, 1996b).

*Third World Conference on Women.* At the end of the women's decade, in 1985, UN leaders held the third women's conference in Nairobi, Kenya. The purpose of this gathering was to appraise achievements and current status of women. Conference delegates concluded that much still needed to be done in this area and developed strategies for improving conditions for women. The final document of the Nairobi conference, known as the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, identified areas of concern to women and children, including violence, poverty, health and education. The

strategies viewed domestic violence as a learned behavior that could harm future generations. Delegates urged governments to increase services for women and to hold perpetrators of violence legally accountable (United Nations, 1986b).

*World Conference on Human Rights.* In 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, women presented UN delegates with a petition that demanded the recognition of violence as an abuse of women's rights. Almost 500,000 individuals from 128 countries signed that petition. The participants also held an international tribunal of violence, where women presented well documented and moving cases of gender-based abuse. The final declaration at the Vienna conference affirmed that women's rights are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights (Heise, 1995). And for the first time, governments officially recognized women's rights as human rights (Bunch, 1995).

*World Summit for Social Development.* In 1995, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark, governments acknowledged that, to combat poverty and social disintegration, women would have to attain equality. Governments also acknowledged that poverty was a form of violence against women (United States Department of State, 1995).

*Fourth World Conference on Women.* At the Fourth World Conference on Women held in September 1995 in Beijing, China, delegates realized that many strategies developed at Nairobi to promote the status of women and children had not been effective. Violence, poverty, illiteracy and poor health continued to affect women disproportionately. Women still occupied only a small minority of leadership positions. In hopes of accelerating progress in the advancement of women's rights, delegates adopted a final document referred to as a Platform for Action, which expressly states that women's rights are human rights. This document was more comprehensive than any previous document issuing from a UN conference on women (United Nations, 1996a).

As the above summary illustrates, in 1948 governments started the evolutionary process of linking human rights to freedoms and rights with regard to sex. The outcome of this process culminated in

an official, comprehensive UN document that expressly recognizes women's rights as human rights.

### **Analysis of women's rights as human rights**

The reasons for expressly recognizing women's rights as human rights require explanation. After all, if women are entitled to a special provision within the broad range of human rights, why should not men also be given the same privilege? The answer to this question involves consideration of gender, health and private and public violence.

### **The role of gender and health**

To understand differing social roles of men and women, people must recognize the distinction between gender and sex. Sex refers to the biological status of male or female, and gender functions as a social construct by which people associate activities and characteristics with a particular sex (Goetz, 1995; Lorber, 1994; Razavi and Miller, 1995). For example, the male gender customarily dominates positions of leadership in government and industry, while the female gender typically occupies positions of lesser status in those same areas.

Gender distinctions resemble a system of subordination and hierarchization with women on the bottom and men on top (Bunch, 1995; Blumberg, 1978; Chafetz, 1984; Kim, 1993; Wood-Wetzel, 1993). This divergence of gender roles provides fertile ground for male violence against women (Lorber, 1994; United Nations, 1996a, 1996b). Gender-based violence against women crosses all cultural, religious and regional boundaries and creates a major problem in every country in which it has been studied (United Nations, 1995).

Surveys of developed and developing countries clearly establish a link between violence and health, including mental health (Paltiel, 1993, 1987; Heise et al., 1994; Heise, 1993; WHO, 1995; Stark and Flintcraft, 1991). In the United States, domestic battery accounts for more bodily injuries to women than auto accidents, muggings and rape combined (Stark and Flintcraft, 1991). Mental health of women has been deteriorating and represents a last frontier in improving the human condition (World Mental Health, 1995). In general, the way society regards and treats women plays an important role in their mental health (Paltiel, 1993).

**Private vs public violence**

In addition to the role played by gender and health in the treatment of women, the circumstances surrounding that treatment have also led to neglect in documenting the extent of the wrong. In 1989 the Worldwatch Institute declared that the most common crime worldwide was violence against women (Wolf, 1991), with violence affecting two levels: private and public. The historic failure to recognize private violence has inhibited greater progress toward eliminating all violence.

**Private violence**

Private violence refers to acts perpetrated by individuals without governmental or societal approval. The key concept within private violence is that government and society view the violence as intolerable. However, until the late 1960s, recognition of private sphere violence was uncommon. Since that time, women have raised consciousness of harms occurring in the private sphere.

Violence against women in the private sphere includes abuse by a spouse or other male partner in the home, the most pervasive form of gender-based violence against women (Table 1) (United Nations, 1995). Worldwide, studies indicate that between 20 and 50 percent of women suffer abuse by a man with whom they are or were intimate (Heise et al., 1994; WHO, 1995). The problem with recording abuse is that worldwide most data are from small ad hoc studies. However, several countries have recently conducted national surveys on aspects of violence against women, particularly physical assault by an intimate partner (United Nations, 1995).

**Public violence**

Public sphere violence refers to violence perpetrated by government or private individuals with actual or apparent governmental approval. Where government or society tolerates a particular form of violence, that violence also falls within the public sphere. Examples of public violence include mass rape by invading armies and forced prostitution sanctioned by government (Yamin, 1996; Copelon, 1995).

Recognition of public sphere violence generally has been greater than that of violence in the private sphere. However, by focusing on wrongs allowed by government, societies have often ignored violence perpetrated by private individuals.

TABLE 1

Survey result on percentage of adult women who have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner

<b>Developed Regions</b>		<b>Africa</b>	
Belgium	25	Kenya, Kissi District	42
Canada	25	Zambia	40
Japan	59	Uganda, Kampala	46
Netherlands	21	Unit. Rep. of Tanzania (Dar es Salaam and 3 districts)	60
New Zealand	17		
Norway, Trondheim	25		
United States	28		
<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b>		<b>Asia and the Pacific</b>	
Antigua	30	India, Southern Karnataka (3 villages)	22
Barbados	30	Jullundur District Punjab (village) schedule	
Chile, Santiago	26	lower caste	75
Costa Rica	54	higher caste	22
Colombia	20	Korea, Rep.	38
Ecuador Quito (low income)	60	Malaysia	39
Guatemala Sacatepeques	36	Papua New Guinea urban	58
Mexico, Mexico City	34	Papua New Guinea rural	67
Jalisco State urban	57	Sri Lanka Colombo (low income)	60
Jalisco State rural	44		
Suriname Paramaribo	35		

Source: United Nations, 1995

### Acknowledging private violence

The failure to recognize private violence has occurred because men rarely experience that violence as victims (Heise, 1995; Chapman, 1995). Occupying crucial policy-making positions, men have directed their attention to what they consider more pressing concerns. Even when disapproving of private violence against women, governments have resisted classifying that violence as a human rights violation. International norms concerning the life of the family call on the state to protect the institution of the family and enshrine the right of privacy in the family. Both the duty to protect the family and privacy rights discourage direct state intervention in the life of the family hindering (Sullivan, 1995) a more comprehensive approach against violence.

Women activists have historically used personal testimony to increase recognition of violations against women (Bunch, 1990, 1995). They have also promoted the view that violence in the domestic sphere must be recognized as a human rights violation. However, many people still refuse to accept private sphere violence

as a human rights violation because they do not view that violence as a public concern. For example, some communities do not even consider domestic battery as illegal (Kim, 1993).

A human rights approach to violence against women can reduce violence on all levels. By responding to the previously hidden private violence, societies can increase awareness of how deeply violence against women is ingrained in everyday life. This awareness would be a major step toward constructing effective measures against all types of violence.

### **Role of non-governmental organizations in Fourth World Conference**

From their inception, UN world conferences on women were structured to include both governmental and non-governmental groups. Parallel to each of those conferences, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have held their own forum from which to present recommendations to conference delegates. Member states of the UN selected the delegates who attended the conferences (Walker, 1995). By contrast, the NGO forum was open to any group registering itself as an NGO. The vitality of an NGO stems from its operation outside official bureaucracies, which enables it to take positions on issues without restrictions often imposed on governmental organizations (Goetz, 1995; Razavi and Miller, 1995).

The NGO forum held in conjunction with the Fourth World Conference on Women met in Hairou, a small city about one hour's traveling time from Beijing. The forum conveyed an atmosphere of diversity, with over 30,000 participants, mainly women, from every corner of the world. Participants represented all social levels, from indigenous groups to those with university affiliations. Each day, the forum presented almost 400 events, with many topics devoted to violence against women and sexual exploitation. Transformation of existing economic and social structures also dominated the focus of participants.

Months before the conference in Beijing, NGO forum participants had provided significant input in preparing the final document of the conference (Haslegrave and Harvard, 1995). While the NGO forum still submitted concerns and recommendations to conference delegates, the bulk of work in drafting the final conference document had already taken place.



### **Symposium on Human Rights and Violence Against Women**

The 1995 Symposium on Human Rights and Violence Against Women held in Hairou, China, represented the first organized gathering of international social workers in conjunction with a UN world conference on women (Wood-Wetzel, 1995). A primary goal of this symposium was to bring social workers together from all parts of the world to exchange ideas and information. During past UN conferences on women, no organized meeting of social workers had occurred (Wood-Wetzel, 1995). Yet underlying themes of the conferences concerned issues of great importance to social workers. By failing to attend as a group, social workers were missing an excellent opportunity to share knowledge.

The genesis of the symposium began with the Women's Caucus of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), a non-governmental organization having consultative status with the UN (Wood-Wetzel, 1995). The Women's Caucus represents women's issues within the IASSW. The caucus organized the symposium and provided social workers with information about attending the symposium.

### **Themes of IASSW symposium**

At the NGO forum in Hairou, the IASSW presented a symposium on human rights and violence against women. Two hundred women and men from 27 countries attended the four-hour symposium (Wood-Wetzel, 1995).

The symposium highlighted a human rights approach for purposes of countering the view that violence against women is a cultural norm. By emphasizing women's rights as human rights, participants at the symposium hoped to create a common thread among social workers in response to violence. The symposium also encouraged governments to consider cultural backgrounds when taking measures against violence.

Participants divided themselves into groups based on the following themes:

- Treatment of groups and individuals affected by violence;
- Poverty as violence against women;
- Violence affecting female refugees and displaced women;
- Social action against violence;
- Teaching about violence and research of violence; and
- Women who kill their batterers.

**IASSW resolution**

Following the symposium, volunteers drafted a resolution to schools of social work and delegates at the UN women's conference. That resolution consisted of 10 elements derived from a model called 'Global Zeitgeist', a synthesis of programs initiated by women for personal, social and economic development, which have proved successful worldwide (Wood-Wetzel, 1993, 1996). The 10 elements originating from the symposium are as follows:

1. *Look to the women: listen to the women.* Always begin with the personal experience of indigenous and local women, generalizing then to state, national and international policies so that the connections between all forms of violence become clear.

2. *Require economic self-determination.* Women must lead and define economic and development policies and programs that impact communities. Current policies leave women with a heritage of destruction in health, environment, education, livelihood, culture and autonomy. Investment priority must be in the human community.

3. *Free women from fear and domination.* War, dislocation, state-sponsored violence, violence in the street and in the home feed the epidemic. It is a fundamental human right of all women and children to live with respect and without fear.

4. *Value all women's work.* The invisibility and undervaluing of women's work within and outside the home lead to their status as the most poor, least educated and most vulnerable to health problems, both physical and mental. Overwork and lack of pay impede human progress.

5. *Place women in decision-making positions.* With women's personal development, relevant social development and action are not only possible but most appropriate and successful.

6. *Promote shared responsibilities in all forms of family and social partnerships.* Human rights include equal sharing of home care and family care. Respect for all forms of human families is a basic to promoting human rights and building healthy communities.

7. *Invest in health care and education.* The prevention of women's physical and mental illness requires access to appropriate and affordable health services. Literacy, numeracy and other forms of basic education improve women's economic status, delay pregnancies and better educate future generations.

8. *Educate all women regarding their legal rights and other laws*

*pertinent to them.* Include the legal education and execution of critical analyses and the development of corrective laws and policies.

9. *Promote positive perceptions of and by women.* Within the context of human rights acknowledge differences and the value of diversity.

10. *Press for relevant gender-specific data collection and research.* Consider new models, such as participation in action research, whereby women themselves select the issues and guide the design, analyses and implementation of results.

The symposium provided social workers from all over the world with the opportunity to learn from each other. This exchange of knowledge helped participants expand their outlook and experience in the overall approach to violence against women.

### **Platform for Action**

At the end of each UN women's conference, delegates approve a final document that generally addresses the overall circumstances of women and children and recommends policies to improve those circumstances. The final document adopted by delegates at the conference in Beijing is referred to as the Platform for Action.

Prior to the conference in Beijing, final documents issuing from UN conferences focused on existing circumstances of women but never addressed women's rights as human rights. The Platform for Action specifically incorporates this concept of human rights. In a further expansion of human rights, the platform recommends measures to promote the status of the girl child. As stated in the platform, the 'girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow' (United Nations, 1996a). The platform is the most supportive official statement on women ever issued by the United Nations and reflects wording on many banners at the NGO forum: all issues are women's issues. Enormous credit for the platform goes to NGOs and other grass-roots organizations.

### **Areas of critical concern**

The Platform for Action addresses 12 areas of critical concern affecting the well being of women. In addition to violence, the platform notes other areas of concern, many of which overlap with violence: poverty; health; armed and other conflicts; human rights; education; economic participation; power sharing and decision

making; national and international mechanisms; mass media; environment and development; and the social role and treatment of the girl child. In addressing the areas of concern, governments need to enhance the advancement and empowerment of all women (United Nations, 1996a).

The platform inspires many positive developments regarding women. It reflects an extensive grass-roots effort by women from all areas of the world, not simply economically developed countries. It addresses oppression of women at all societal levels and provides a comprehensive strategy for advancement of women. A major position of the platform elevates women's rights over cultural norms.

However, even though the platform represents a unique and extremely important step forward for women, drawbacks to the platform exist. A primary difficulty in transforming the platform from mere words to action lies in its non-binding legal status. No government is obligated to follow directives or strategies outlined in the platform. At times, the wording of the platform also becomes cumbersome, thereby losing clarity.

Aside from its deficiencies, the platform still embodies the best effort to date of an agenda for advancement of women in society. This achievement offers great potential for improving the status of women all over the world.

### **Conclusion**

The theme of the UN conference at Beijing, 'look at the world through women's eyes', urges us to reflect upon what women see and experience. By emphasizing that women's rights are human rights, social workers can broaden support in eradicating violence and holding governments accountable in bringing about change. A challenge for social workers is to encourage governments to adopt the platform and make it legally binding. Another task is to continue sharing international experiences and knowledge with communities, schools and institutions. By carrying forward momentum gained from the platform for action, social workers occupy a unique position to truly bring about change.

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