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## **The UN Fourth Conference on Women**

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## Introduction

The Fourth UN World Conference on Women, held in Beijing from 4-15 September 1995, can be seen as one of the most significant international conferences of recent times. While the Conference documents focused on the gains made by women in the 10 years since the last UN Conference on Women, a more fundamental concern of the discussions was the causes and impact of the continuing inequality and disadvantage experienced by women which has such a negative effect on their ability to lead productive and dignified lives. In particular, the Conference brought into international debate many issues not previously discussed at this level and a sharper focus on those critical problems faced by women in developing countries, especially in places where economic and social developments have not kept pace with the needs of communities or where national policies do not accord women equal rights or opportunities in their society.

This conference was also significant in its scale. In addition to the 5,000 official delegates, an estimated 30,000 representatives of NGOs from all over the world gathered in Huairou, 53 kms from Beijing, from 30 August to participate in the NGO Forum. Upwards of some 300 press people covered both the NGO Forum and the UN conference. The Australian delegation was headed by the Minister for Human Services and Health, Dr Carmen Lawrence. Kathleen Townsend, Head of the Office of the Status of Women, was Deputy Leader. The remainder of the delegation consisted of 14 Government officials, five parliamentarians, two NGO representatives, two Peak-Body representatives and the Chair of the Australian Council for Women. AusAID was represented in the Australian Delegation by Dr Helen Ware, Assistant Director General, Sectoral Policy and Review Branch and Dr Elizabeth Brouwer, Director, Gender, Education and Social Development Section. Ms Janet Hunt, Executive Director of ACFOA, was on the Australian Delegation as a technical adviser. AusAID was given main responsibility for negotiations on a number of areas and issues including: poverty, structural adjustment and debt, environment and resources, and a supporting role in negotiations on health, economic participation and institutional issues.

## Aims and agenda of the Conference

The main aims of the Conference were:

- to review the advancement of women since 1985 in terms of the objectives of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the year 2000;

- to mobilise women and men at both policy making and grassroots levels to achieve these objectives;
- to adopt the Platform for Action, concentrating on some of the key issues identified as representing a fundamental obstacle to the advancement of the majority of women; and
- to determine the priorities to be followed in 1996 - 2000 for the implementation of the Strategies within the United Nations system.

The agreed Platform for Action is a 362 paragraph document which provides a comprehensive analysis of 13 critical areas of concern affecting women. It recommends action by governments, by UN and multilateral organisations, by financial institutions and private sector bodies, by NGOs and by donors, bilateral and multilateral. It builds on the gains made at recent UN conferences, including Vienna on Human Rights in Vienna, Population and Development in Cairo, and the Social Summit in Copenhagen in March 1995. The critical areas of concern which were the focus of discussion at the Conference were: poverty; education; health; violence; armed conflict; economic participation; decision making; the advancement of women; human rights; the media; the environment; and the rights of the girl child.

At the outset of the Conference 40 per cent of the draft Platform was the subject of debate and the main task was to reach consensus language on this bracketed text. An atmosphere of achievement was present from the beginning of the negotiations in Beijing and there was genuine will on the part of all 189 delegations to leave Beijing with a strong Platform for Action. Through negotiation and careful wording on a number of difficult issues this was achieved.

The most contentious issues were:

- **reproductive rights** - the document reaffirms the right of women to free and non coercive family planning services and information, and the right to choose the size, number, timing and spacing of her family;
- **sexual orientation** - specific reference to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was removed but sexual rights are encompassed in the reference to 'other discriminatory factors';
- **cultural particularities** - reference to social and cultural circumstances modifying the responsibility of governments to address the rights of women in key health areas was removed;
- **the diversity of families** - the document acknowledges the diversity of families and does not restrict the definition to only encompass a husband/wife and children;

- **parental responsibilities** - the document confirms the rights of girls to information and advice about reproductive health, not only where parental consent is given, but without it, if it is 'in the best interests of the child';
- **inheritance** - the document reaffirms the equal rights of women and girls to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property;
- **abortion** - the document encourages countries to remove or repeal laws that penalise women who have abortions;
- **unpaid and unremunerated work** - the document encourages countries to introduce systems to record the value and contribution of women's unpaid work and include the data in national statistical accounts;
- **landmines** - the document calls for a moratorium on the export of anti-personnel landmines and urges universal ratification of the Convention restricting the use of such devices;
- the document condemns **forced abortion and rape** as instruments of war. All gender-based violence perpetrated in war, including 'ethnic cleansing', are denounced as acts of violence and a violation of women's human rights;
- **international prostitution and trafficking** - a special rapporteur on violence should be appointed to examine the issue of women and girls in prostitution and trafficking networks;
- **harmful cultural and traditional practices** - female genital mutilation is especially condemned as a crime of violence against women;
- **structural adjustment and debt** - the document acknowledges that some structural adjustment programmes have had detrimental consequences and notes that the design of SAPs should specifically take into account the impact on women;
- **environment** - countries are to work towards the prohibition of transboundary movement of hazardous and radioactive wastes and to protect and strengthen the intellectual property rights of indigenous women to ensure equitable sharing of benefits; and
- **resources** - the provision of adequate and sufficient resources for the implementation of Platform actions was endorsed but within the framework of regular budgets or in terms of a reallocation of funding.

### Outcomes of the Conference for development assistance

The Platform for Action is a comprehensive and broad-ranging analysis of the current issues of concern to women and as such is a valuable reference for those involved in developing action-oriented programmes to address the problems facing women. For AusAID the Platform will be a useful resource for country programmers. It will also help to inform policy approaches to women's issues and concerns raised in multilateral fora. More generally, there are a number of areas in which the Platform for Action has direct implications for those people and organisations involved in aid programmes.

### 1. The Conference Platform endorsed a number of general issues. These include:

**Gender analysis:** The Conference reaffirmed the importance of gender analysis as a fundamental methodological tool. In all organisations responsible for policy formulation, identification and funding of programmes and in the implementation of programmes and activities, a gender perspective and gender analysis of the impact of these policies and programmes is to be undertaken. Collection of data and statistics should be disaggregated by sex. Furthermore, the Platform strongly recommends the full involvement of women in decision making, in the process of policy formulation and programme development and in reviewing the impact of implementation on women. Guidelines and procedures should be rewritten to take account of this requirement and to ensure that the interests and perspectives of women are taken on board at all stages. This recommendation applies to governments and funding agencies.

**Country programmes:** The Platform contains specific recommendations for governments to address the situation of women in their communities. The Platform can be used to ascertain the actions considered a priority, or which would have the most substantial impact on the lives of women. Progress in the priority areas identified in the Platform can also be used to assess governments' performance.

**Aid programming:** The Platform also contains specific recommendations for bilateral and multilateral donors, UN agencies, IFIs and NGOs, outlining actions these organisations should take in a range of sectors. The Platform provides guidance on the organisational and programming requirements to ensure the activities of these organisations are effective in addressing women's needs. As such, the document contains a useful checklist of the appropriate criteria to use to assess the design and implementation strategies of programmes developed by these agencies before co-financing or other contributions are finalised.

**UN agencies:** The Platform makes a strong argument for all UN agencies to be more active in integrating gender analysis and perspectives into organisational and programming activities. Each organisation within the UN system will be responsible at the highest levels for the integration of gender issues into policies and programmes. In many cases this may require a review and reform of the strategies and working methods of different UN mechanisms for the advancement of women. The Platform also recommends specific actions for the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Commission on the Status of Women, the UN Secretariat and other functional units or commissions of the UN system to, *inter alia*, strengthen their respective mandates to ensure that barriers to the advancement of women are eliminated, to develop focal points within the organisations to monitor the integration of gender into policy, planning, programming and budgeting and to provide sufficient resources to support the necessary follow-up activities to the Conference.

**2. More specifically, the Platform contains discussion on a range of development issues which will be valuable for those concerned with programme design and implementation.**

**Poverty focused programmes:** The Platform reaffirms the statement from the Social Summit that 'broad-based and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development is necessary to sustain social development and social justice' and argues strongly for specific actions to address growing poverty among women. The design of poverty focused programmes should acknowledge the growing number of female heads of households, women's lack of access to resources, especially land and capital, and provide for greater access by women to credit and opportunities for involvement in micro-enterprise developments.

**Education programmes:** The Platform argues cogently that education for women and girls is a priority issue and that a major effort should be made to eradicate illiteracy worldwide. The focus should be on primary education and a target of 80 per cent primary school attendance by the year 2000 is set. The Platform provides additional arguments for programmes to focus on improving the access of women and girls not only to basic schooling but also to opportunities for life-long learning and skills training and for the inclusion of science and technology subjects in these non formal learning programmes.

**The human rights of women:** The Vienna Declaration on Human Rights was strongly reaffirmed and the Platform focused clearly on emphasising that the human rights of women were inalienably encompassed within basic human rights. The discussion in the Platform identifies a large range of circumstances in which women's rights are consistently violated and encourages governments to take positive measures to change this. There are a number of ways in which these requirements could be incorporated into programmes, including: support for activities which assist in ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); support for the review of laws and legislation so that a gender perspective is included; development of training programmes in human rights which include a focus on the special conditions of women; support for programmes which disseminate information about human rights to women and the development of guidelines for women on how to use laws and international instruments to overcome discrimination; and research programmes which identify the differential impact of laws and legislation on women and other disadvantaged groups.

**Health programmes:** The Platform contains a comprehensive set of recommendations relating to improving women's access to affordable and appropriate health care services and to information about health risks and treatments. Strong emphasis is placed on the importance of strengthening

preventive programmes that promote women's health, with special attention to programmes that enable women to develop increased self-esteem and take greater responsibility for their own health. The issue of human rights and discriminatory practices is of key concern and a clear link is made between harmful traditional practices and attitudes severely affecting the health and lives of women. Two other areas for specific attention are the problem of sexually transmitted diseases and the need for research on issues that affect women's health. The Platform provides a valuable overview of health-related issues, but also identifies women's health as being affected by poverty, domestic violence, educational disadvantage, lack of control over sexuality and reproduction, and lack of influence in decision making. Programmes to address women's health need to take into account such broad causal factors.

**Violence and conflict:** The Platform addresses violence against women encompassing physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, the community and perpetrated or condoned by the State. Such violence includes trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and female infanticide. The Platform identifies groups of women particularly vulnerable to acts of violence and strongly condemns the violations of human rights occurring in situations of conflict. In some situations bilateral donors may face substantial difficulties in providing assistance to combat violence. However, support is possible by working through NGOs or UN organisations. For example, these organisations could support governments in ratifying CEDAW. They could also support governments to develop strategies to eliminate violence against women in their communities and assist in providing shelters and refuges for victims of violence. Governments could spread information about prevention and care, and assist to vulnerable women, such as refugee, displaced or disabled women, to become economically self-sufficient and provide programmes that address the causes and consequences of trafficking in women and girls.

**Structural adjustment programmes and debt:** The Platform acknowledges that in some cases the implementation of structural adjustment programmes has had negative consequences on the social circumstances of communities, and women have been the worst affected. This has usually been the result of badly designed or implemented SAPs and there are a number of recommendations that address this issue. Structural adjustment programmes should be analysed from a gender perspective and carried out with the full and active participation of women, both in the design and during implementation. The Platform also notes that the structural causes of poverty should be addressed and that donors should explore new and innovative ways of alleviating the debt of highly indebted countries.

**Environment issues:** The Platform argues that poverty and environmental degradation are closely linked and (noting that women are largely responsible for many environmental and

resource management issues but are absent from policy and decision making levels), identifies the need for programmes addressing environmental issues to recognise women's role in resource management. For women to be fully effective, however, training and access to technology are essential and the Platform encourages assistance for training in science and technology for women and girls as a long-term investment in better environmental management. The rights of indigenous women are strongly supported, another area in which the aid programme can provide effective and strategic assistance, particularly through programmes which develop stronger information networks and raise women's awareness about their rights to the benefits from traditional knowledge or technologies.

These are just some of the issues which should be considered in development assistance activities.

### **Support for Pacific women**

In recognition of the priority attached to Pacific Women in Development issues, and the importance of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, in late 1993 Australia adopted the role of Regional Lead Donor for the Pacific in the lead up to the 1995 Conference. In this role AusAID acted as a focal point for Pacific preparations through dissemination of information on preparatory activities and related funding needs, and the coordination of donor responses to meet the needs of government ministries and NGOs. In particular, Australia provided substantial support for preparations by Pacific countries through funding for regional workshops and meetings to discuss the Draft Platform for Action. This programme was coordinated by the Pacific Women's Resource Bureau of the South Pacific Commission and through administrative support from the Australian Embassy, Suva. Australia also funded the attendance at the Beijing Conference of one Government and one NGO representative from each Pacific Forum country plus Palau.

Each country developed a national report identifying issues of concern. These national reports were combined into the Pacific Platform for Action, which sets out critical issues for women of the region. It also recommends specific strategic actions to be adopted at national and regional level for the resolution of these problems. Thirteen issues of concern to Pacific women were identified: health; education and training; economic empowerment; agriculture and fishing; legal rights and human rights; shared decision making; environment; culture and the family; mechanisms to promote the advancement of women; violence; peace and justice; poverty; and indigenous people's rights.

Pacific countries were strongly represented at the Conference by a large contingent, including a number of current members of Parliament. They were effective in coordinating positions with the G77, including PNG serving as coordinator of the Asian Group within the G77. The Pacific group was able to present strong positions, both in the Main Committee and in the informal Working Groups in a number of key areas such as the environment, nuclear weapons and the rights of indigenous women to traditional knowledge and inheritance. Regular and effective contact was maintained by AusAID representatives with Pacific delegations. In discussions, most countries indicated that a priority was to strengthen women's groups, both by NGO and Government machineries. Violence against women was also a major issue.

Australia has made a specific commitment to assist the countries of the Pacific implement programmes which address priority issues for women. This commitment is one of a number which the Cabinet endorsed and which were announced by Dr Lawrence. In essence, the Government has agreed to provide further financial assistance for Pacific women's groups, both regional and national, in implementing priority programmes and commitments that Pacific governments have made to address the constraints facing women in their communities.