

Report on the Commission on the Status of Women, United Nations, “Beijing Plus 10”

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WHAT: The 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, a conference intended to bring together delegates from countries around the world to evaluate progress reaching the goal to achieve gender equality as identified at an earlier conference in Beijing ten years ago; to discuss topics affecting the economic and social status of women today; and to develop a working Declaration of the rights of women. It was aimed to recognize that the Beijing Platform for Action and Declaration had not yet been fully achieved in the last ten years and to reaffirm the commitment to achieving gender equality.

The meeting – also referred to “Beijing Plus 10” -- included panels, strategy sessions, press conferences, caucuses and a large number of side events.

WHERE: Held in New York City, at the United Nations headquarters, church center, and affiliated organizations.

WHEN: February 28-March 11, 2005.

WHO: Over 3,500 women (and some men) of all ages and backgrounds, from over 130 countries representing cultures all over the world, from Asian to African, American and European. Participants included women’s rights advocates and activists, gender experts, policy makers, NGO representatives, and indigenous women. Over 2,500 were representatives from the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) registered by the Division for the Advancement of Women at the UN, over 1,800 represented delegations from 165 out of the 191 UN member states, and several hundred were from UN agencies.

Some attendees were sponsored by organizations, while many paid their own way, with some barely able to afford the expensive airfare and accommodations in New York.

PURPOSE: The two-week conference is also referred to by the name “Beijing Plus 10” because it aimed to assess progress on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by 189 governments at the Fourth World Conference on Women held ten years ago in 1995 in the Chinese capital of Beijing. That document identifies twelve areas in which to address women’s rights and inequality, including poverty, education, violence and mass media, and is considered the strongest policy statement of women’s rights made by an international community.

The conference addressed concerns across cultures, including violence against women, gender inequality, education, AIDS, property rights in inheritance, maternal mortality, marital rape, problems of refugees, abortion and trafficking. Resolutions on some of

these issues were posed by delegations from various countries.

The topics complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the UN. The MDGs include cutting global poverty in half, eliminating laws that discriminate against women, universal access to primary education for girls, promotion of gender equality, reduction of infant mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters, and improving women's health by reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

BACKGROUND:

The first UN World Conference on Women took place in Mexico thirty years ago, with men mostly in attendance at that time, in stark contrast to the predominantly female attendance at Beijing Plus 10.

After Mexico, conferences were held in Nairobi, Copenhagen and then Beijing. All called for governments to end discrimination in education, health care, politics, employment, inheritance rights and many other fields.

The conference in 1995 in Beijing developed an extensive document (called the Beijing Platform) recommending policies to achieve women's rights, adopted by governments. A five-year review took place in New York in the summer 2000, called "Beijing Plus 5." There were drawn-out negotiations over the text of the Beijing Platform from 1995, resulting in minimal improvements over the original document.

However, some gains were made, in opening the issues to broad discussion and exposing the issues to public knowledge through media coverage. In addition, the conference was notable for establishing that equality for women is not a Western construct foisted upon traditional societies but a universal human right to be observed by every one of the 189 governments that signed the Beijing document.

Some highlights:

Opening speech by Secretary General Kofi Annan:

Secretary General Annan noted positive gains but also the need for more progress. On the positive side, he noted "tangible progress" over this last decade on several fronts:

Many governments since the 1995 Beijing women's conference had recognized that women's equality was critical to a nation's development and growth. "Sixty years have passed since the founders of the United Nations inscribed, on the first page of the Charter, the equal rights of women and men and that ten years ago, women gathered in Beijing and took a giant step forward, and as a result, the world recognized explicitly that gender equality is critical to the development and peace of every nation."

Life expectancy over the last decade had improved, fertility rates are falling, more girls are enrolled in primary education; more women are earning an income than ever before.

But he also warned, there are new challenges like “odious” trafficking of women and children and the “terrifying” growth of HIV/Aids among women -- especially young women” -- are imperiling the quest for female equality.

“If we are to change the historical legacy that puts women at a disadvantage in most societies ... we must take specific, targeted action on a number of fronts.” He particularly noted that sex trafficking and the growth of AIDS were imperiling the quest for female equality

Annan’s Recommendations/Proposals:

- “seven specific investments and policies” that can be applied readily over the coming decade, on a scale large enough to make a real difference: strengthen girls' access to secondary as well as primary education; guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights; invest in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens; guarantee women's and girls' property and inheritance rights; eliminate gender inequality in employment; increase women's share of seats in national parliaments and local government; and redouble efforts to combat violence against girls and women.”
- "investments" in women over the next decade: secondary education that would allow girls to make choices, such as refusing early forced marriages.
- The need for sexual and reproductive health rights to prevent half a million a year from dying from pregnancy-related disease that were preventable.

Opening-night event: Launch of one of author Eve Ensler’s V-Day Violence V-Campaigns, consistent with the conference themes of the injustice of rape and sexual abuse, that was focused on ending violence against women and girls, and specifically recognized solidarity with the 200,000 Korean "comfort women" who were forced into sexual slavery by Japan's military during World War II.

Press briefing chaired by actress Meryl Streep, on behalf of the New York-based women's rights organization Equality Now. Streep said she was not there because it was an "exotic" thing to do, but because her grandmother raised three children and was the smartest person she ever met, but could not vote in her own lifetime.

Presentation by South Africa's Desmond Tutu.

International Women’s Day, celebrated March 8th.

This date commemorated by the U.N., is celebrated by women's groups around the world and designated in many countries as a national holiday, intended to bring together women divided by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, to acknowledge the struggle for equality, justice, peace and development; to celebrate women in history who have fought for rights to vote and hold public office as well as gender equality in jobs, education and all aspects of society; and to reflect on progress made and call for change.

The tradition dates back to ancient Greece, when Lysistrata initiated a sexual strike against men in order to end war; and includes Parisian women during the French Revolution who marched on Versailles to demand women's right to vote, calling for "liberty, equality, fraternity." The first such celebratory day was observed in the United States on February 28, 1909 and spread to rallies around the world.

Addresses by Nobel Peace Prize winners and heads of the 4 UN conferences on women since 1975.

2004 winner Wangari Maathai for her environmental work in Kenya said women must celebrate their achievements, including her prize, but must fight poverty by championing debt relief and open markets and tackle climate change and deforestation.

1992 winner, Rigoberta Menchu, advocate for Indian rights in Guatemala, said women should be "a beacon of hope" to change systems promoting racism, discrimination, exclusion and the lack of economic opportunity. "It is us who will eventually have to convince our governments that women need to be given equal space, to be given an opportunity to exploit their potential, and that it is not a gift for women to participate in decision-making - it is a right."

Helvi Sipilä, 89, secretary-general of the first U.N. women's conference in Mexico City in 1975, sent a video message from Finland that women have made "considerable strides toward gender equality" but not enough has been done to advance peace.

Gertrude Mongella, secretary-general of the 1995 Beijing conference and now president of the Pan-African Parliament, recalled that in her final speech in Beijing she said: "A revolution has begun and there's no going back." Ten years later, she said, women are more visible, gender equality "has become a working concept worldwide," and "women and men are now mobilized to see women's issues as societal issues, whether they like it or not." "We are here to set a new speed," Mongella said. "We are here to remove the remaining obstacles. ... We are on the right track of our revolution. There is no going back."

Former U.N. assistant secretary-general Angela King, who was Annan's top adviser on women and organized the 2000 U.N. conference said the challenges of five years ago are the challenges of today. She said an increasing number of women live in poverty, lag behind in economic advancement, are hurt by globalization, are contracting HIV/AIDS in greater numbers and are increasingly subject to violence in armed conflicts and through trafficking. She noted that there are only four women prime ministers of independent countries and few women are at peace tables. She said, "Let us pledge today as the United Nations community, as governments, regions and individuals, that the flame for women's freedom and equality become a shining beacon for action to fully realize gender equality, development and peace."

The Role of the United Nations

The United Nations strongly supports the campaign to promote and protect equal rights of women, and maintains that no enduring solution to society's most threatening social,

economic and political problems can be found without the full participation and empowerment of the world's women. The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco in 1945, was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right.

Since then, the UN has helped create internationally agreed strategies, standards, programs and goals to advance the status of women worldwide. The UN action for the advancement of women has taken four clear directions:

(1) promotion of legal measures, (2) mobilization of public opinion and international action, (3) training and research, and (4) direct assistance to disadvantaged groups.

SUMMARY OF OUTCOME:

- Affirmation of The Beijing Declaration
- The adoption of six new resolutions on the subjects of:
 - 1) Gender mainstreaming in national policies and programs
 - 2) Integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster
 - 3) Trafficking
 - 4) Women's economic advancement
 - 5) Indigenous women
 - 6) Possible appointment of a special reporter on discrimination against women

- Four additional issues were noted as requiring urgent action, including:
 - (1) The alarming high rate of HIV/AIDS infection globally in women and the girl child
 - (2) Support for the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)
 - (3) the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan
 - (4) the situation of, and assistance to, Palestinian women.

The chairperson, Ms. Kyung-wha Kang, said in closing, "Most importantly, we have come together in clear, unqualified reaffirmation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action...and re-energized ourselves to stay the course with greater resolve and see to it that they are fully and speedily implemented."

The original Beijing Declaration in 1995 addressed issues including that women were entitled to be represented in decision-making at all levels; that women have the right to decide on matters of their sexuality and child-bearing; and that domestic violence is a problem in every country and that governments should intervene to prevent it.

Over time, phrases such as gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, gender sensitive and gender equality are more commonly used, heard and seen. For example, since 2001, there is a gender sensitivity program included among the compulsory training programs for civil servants in Malaysia.

Carolyn Hannan, a senior official at the U.N. Department Economic and Social Affairs, said, "Progress has been achieved in some areas, in girls' education and women's legal rights, but there are many negative indicators that need urgent attention." Those include continued violence against women, lack of economic opportunities and unequal representation in decision-making in both wealthy and poorer countries. Governments had agreed to adopt polices that would set aside 30 percent of parliamentary seats for women, but ten years later, only 15 percent of parliamentarians in the world are women. And some worldwide economic trends have weakened women's struggle for economic and political equality. Easier access to information technology has increased women's networking and economic opportunities, but millions of women farmers are becoming poorer and poorer, caused by the shift from food production to cash crop production. Aside from such economic globalization trends, escalating military build-ups also undermine women's struggle for economic and political equality.

Panel on International Women's Day

U.N. officials and women leaders expressed optimism but also a slow pace of reforms for women's rights, and urged member states to move beyond planning.

Dr. Nafis Sadik, special advisor to the Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, said, governments spend more than \$900 billion on the military while the world's richest countries spend less than \$70 million on development assistance, and only \$3 billion goes to gender equality programs. "What contributes more to security, \$3 billion invested in women or the \$900 billion squandered on weapons?" Sadik asked, to loud applause. "It is time for political leaders to stop talking about peace and really start investing in it." She added, "What women need now, and what global security demands, is action. We here have to do that at the U.N."

She cited a recent report from the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change which concluded that world security must be based on equal rights for women and recommended "greater consultation with and involvement in peace processes of important voices from civil society, especially those of women." She called for more access to policy-making by U.N. offices with expertise on women such as the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, U.N. Development Fund for Women, and the Human Rights Committee, saying, "If you're not sitting at the policy table, how can you make change?" (Her speech invoked emotion from the audience).

Panelist Rachel Mayanja, top UN advisor on women as the special advisor to the secretary-general on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, warned that "the task ahead is not going to be any less difficult than it has been during the past decades" and said that "The eradication of poverty and disease is as important as dealing with the criminal networks that traffic in women and children."

SPECIFIC ISSUES:

Violence against women:

A major topic addressed was violence towards women.

UNIFEM's executive director reported that one out of every three women worldwide has been beaten, forced to have sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Many more cases go unreported. Violence includes war-time rapes, trafficking across borders for sale into prostitution or slave labor; genital mutilation; "dowry murders" where wives are killed, often by burning, so that husbands and in-law families can get a dowry from the next wife; acid attacks or "honor killings" common in Muslim countries where women and young girls are punished or killed for having been raped, offending men by refusing their advances, refusing to agree to arranged marriages, or for offenses of their own male family members.

A World Bank report identified violence against women equal in severity and extent to cancer and a greater problem than traffic accidents and malaria combined.

Trafficking

At least 700,000 people, mostly women and children are trafficked each year across international borders, with girls as young as 13 from Asia and eastern Europe becoming "mail-order brides."

A resolution was sponsored by the United States to reduce all forms of commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls, and call on governments to adopt or strengthen legislative and other measures to deter exploiters and discourage the demand that fosters trafficking; to criminalize trafficking in all its forms; to ensure protection and assistance to victims. This would complement the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.

The Commission would call on governments and civil society to: take appropriate measures to raise public awareness of the issue; implement educational programs; undertake research on methods and strategies, and mass media campaigns, and social and economic initiatives to prevent and combat trafficking, and encourage the business sector, especially the tourism industry and Internet providers, to develop and adhere to codes of conduct to prevent trafficking.

Gender Mainstreaming:

The Secretary-General would be asked to report to the Commission at its next session on progress in mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that address the inequality between men and women in sharing power and decision-making at all levels.

The Commission also calls for integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster. The tsunami killed over 220,000 people in 12 countries across Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Africa, and over 1.6 million people were displaced, of which over 50,000 are women.

Several meetings at the CSW conference, including one on International Women's Day, centered on the issues related to women related to the tsunami.

These are elaborated in a more extensive report I have submitted on various meetings.

Rights activists listed many problems women suffered. These included that:

- 1) more women died. This was due to several reasons: women were hampered by their long hair and flowing clothing, and the religious restrictions from being unclothed and shame over being caught naked that prevented them from disrobing, that could have helped save them. Also since the tsunami happened on a Sunday, more men were on the water, fishing, while more women were at their homes.
- 2) men were able to run faster while women and children were less able to swim or run fast.
- 3) 150,000 women were pregnant, and are a marginalized group among the survivors who need a range of assistance, including maternity and post-natal care. Fatima Burnad of the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum, said, "Women are psychologically affected. Pregnant and lactating women are bearing the pain and need more attention."
- 4) women are more vulnerable in the aftermath of such natural disasters, and the relief and reconstruction efforts must meet their specific needs and entitlements.
- 5) the tsunami has "sharpened existing inequalities" that prevail in the affected communities, leaving women and girls more marginalized, said Christine Evans-Klock, director of the East Asia office of the International Labour Organisation.
- 6) NGOs have asserted that in most devastated communities there have been "gender-specific aftershocks."
- 7) women have suffered more after the tsunami because they are the ones "taking care of everyone else. Many suddenly found themselves the heads of households," said Dr. Chaiyos Kunanusont, an advisor at the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA).
- 8) employment is not easy for women. Many women had to go to work for the first time, but lack adequate skills and training. Lack of skills and work experience creates additional risks, that could lead to trafficking and prostitution.
- 9) female migrant workers in the tsunami-affected areas are even more at risk, for example, those in parts of southern Thailand.

Cholpon Akmatova, resource officer at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, said the problems for female survivors varies from country to country. The APWLD, which has a membership of over 110 women's organizations across Asia and the Pacific, did a study. Findings included that in Indonesia's Aceh province, where the most people died, displaced women in camps do not have bathrooms that are secure and private, forcing them to go unwashed for weeks, which affects their reproductive health. The study further showed that Sri Lanka had the worst violations of women's rights, "with women in makeshift camps being victims of physical abuse, including rape, gang rape, molestation and physical abuse of women and girls, in the course of unsupervised rescue operations and while resident in temporary shelters," including being subject to attempts at molestation by men in charge of camps. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the report said that babies are dying in refugee camps due to the lack of milk.

Women's groups appealed for:

- 1) a shift in thinking. UNIFEM's Lazlo said, "A human rights based approach is needed, and the women have to be empowered and be asked to participate in the reconstruction effort."
- 2) more gender sensitive programs to help the special needs of women and girls. Gender-neutral programs are not effective, as gender neutral relief and rehabilitation policies reinforce the patriarchal social order. Gender sensitive programs need to guarantee equal access to resources, a right to security and freedom from violence, and the right to gain access to land that is often in the husband's name.

A draft text sponsored by the Philippines on integrating a gender perspective in post-disaster relief efforts, particularly in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, called for the Commission to urge governments, the United Nations and all related entities to

- 1) integrate a gender perspective in planning for disaster preparedness and responding to natural disasters,
- 2) meet the needs of affected populations such as food, clean water, shelter and physical security, as well as to provide services such as health care, including reproductive health, psychological health and psychosocial support and education, taking into account the particular needs of women and girls.
- 3) address the gender equality dimensions of livelihood, security, land tenure, land rights, property and housing -- since they pose major challenges to women, in particular widows, women heads of households, women with disabilities, and women who had lost family members in natural disasters.
- 4) give special attention to the vulnerabilities and capacities of marginalized groups of women and girls.
- 5) take necessary measures to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and all other forms of violence in the context of natural disasters and to provide appropriate care for those who had been exposed to sexual abuse and other forms of violence.
- 6) support gender-sensitive capacity-building at all levels of disaster management and insure that women are included in all levels of decision-making in disaster situations, including in community-level welfare centers for displaced persons.

Economic Advancement for Women

The United States submitted a new draft text on economic advancement for women, calling on Member States to eliminate discrimination; provide equal access and encourage women's and girls' participation in education at all levels; undertake legislative and administrative reforms to create a strong enabling environment for women entrepreneurs; promote the collection, dissemination and analysis of statistics that are disaggregated by gender to better facilitate monitoring of the situation of women; and eliminate discrimination in the work place, providing equal opportunity for the hiring and advancement of women.

In addition, Member States are called on to facilitate further development of the financial sector to increase women's access to savings, lending and other financial services;

encourage business organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, revolving loan funds and others to provide services to women entrepreneurs; enhance rural women's income-generating potential; promote government and civil society programs that can enhance the economic opportunity of vulnerable women, such as widows, women with disabilities, elderly women, women belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons; and promote equal access for women to information and communication technology-based economic activities and to information systems and improved technologies.

All relevant United Nations funds, programs and agencies are encouraged to assist governments in strengthening their capacity to reform laws, practices and institutions in order to promote women's entrepreneurship.

Indigenous Women

Representatives of native communities led by 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, Guatemalan human rights activist and the official spokesperson for the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Peoples (1994 - 2003), criticized that indigenous people were not even mentioned in the Beijing Platform of Action for women in 1995.

A news conference on the plight of indigenous women presented how indigenous women are victims of violence at alarmingly high rates, and subjected to double discrimination based on racism and sexism.

The panel included:

Rebecca Lolosoli, founder of the Umoja Uaso Women's Group in northern Kenya to help woman allegedly raped by British soldiers (using the area for tropical training), criticized the Kenyan and British governments for not supporting the up to 1,600 women who have been raped, or their children. Many of the women, she said, have been left or worse, killed, by their husbands because of the rape, being called "prostitutes." A London law firm is preparing a class-action suit against the British government on behalf of the Samburu and Masai women.

Mirna Cunningham, a former Nicaraguan government minister, now president of the Center for Indigenous Peoples' Autonomy and Development, echoed those points, citing racism, and saying that women in Latin America are similarly raped by soldiers and farmers, and accused of being prostitutes. More than 600 women are killed every year in Guatemala and women are used as "a weapon of war" in Colombia.

Celeste McKay, from the Native Women's Association of Canada, said indigenous women in Canada are vulnerable to violence because they are marginalized (poor, homeless, under-educated, and subject to broken families). Those aged 25 to 44 are five times more likely than non-Indigenous women to die as a result of violence, and estimates that over 500 have died in the last twenty years. She cited an Amnesty International report that Canadian officials, promoting protection of human rights internationally, fail to implement measures to reduce the women's marginalization.

Elissavet Stamatopoulou, chief of the secretariat of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, said that violence is perpetuated by policies that deny indigenous women access to education, health care and the justice systems.

HIV/AIDS and women and girls.

In his opening address, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said that HIV/AIDS infections have increased in women, now accounting for almost half of the 37 million adults infected with the virus.

Unprotected heterosexual intercourse is now a leading cause of HIV infections in the world. More than half of all new HIV infections are among young people ages 15 to 24, with rates among girls 15 to 19 five times higher than boys of that age. Considering the number of new cases of HIV infections among young females, a resolution was drafted by Mauritius on behalf of the Southern African Development Community. Given that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is considered fundamental to reducing women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, governments are urged to take all necessary measures to empower women, strengthen their economic independence, and protect and promote their human rights and fundamental freedoms, to enable them to protect themselves from the HIV infection.

Governments are also called upon to intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls in relation to HIV/AIDS, including through challenging stereotypes, stigmatization, discriminatory attitudes and gender inequalities, and to encourage the active involvement of men and boys towards those ends.

Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, HIV/AIDS activist in 1995, said the issue of women and HIV/AIDS is only beginning to be addressed. Asian women are at risk, with numbers of women infected in Malaysia rising faster than men, and enough has not been done to educate women about HIV, nor to create the environment that would empower women to protect themselves. Mandatory premarital testing was criticized, such as that in a few states in Malaysia, on the grounds that it is a patriarchal approach to protecting women. Problems include that there is no protection from stigma or discrimination for the HIV-positive couple that chooses to marry, and no evaluation has been done to see if the mandatory premarital testing programs achieve anything.

Other Issues:

*Role of men and boys. At the Youth Caucuses, there was debate about use of language to refer to females, and use of words like "people," so as to include males.

*Assistance to Palestinian Women. The draft resolution on the situation of and assistance to Palestinian women sponsored by Jamaica on behalf of the "Group of 77" developing countries and China, would have the Commission call on the concerned parties, as well as the international community, to exert all necessary efforts to ensure the full resumption of the peace process on its agreed basis, taking into account the common ground already

gained. The representative from Japan welcomed the peace efforts made by Israel and Palestine. The representative of Niger hoped that mechanisms could be identified to establish lasting peace in the region.

*Women need more information about their rights and tools available to them. For instance, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) offers countries that join the CEDAW Optional Protocol a mechanism for individuals or groups to submit claims of rights violations prohibited under the convention.

*One session at the UN church center was a debate about war. Putting war on trial in a mock court, women portrayed prosecutor, defense attorney, judge and witnesses. Arguments for war including boosting the economy, drew boos.

* Delegates at the conference discussed issues related to forcible marriage of young girls, and how women should have the right to decide about marriage, as well as the right to decide how often they would have children, as well as other issues relating to sexuality and sex education for adolescents.

Background Statistics:

EDUCATION - Of the 150 million children age 6 to 11 not in schools, more than 90 million are girls. In sub-Sahara Africa, 40 percent of the girls do not go to primary school. Two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate adults are women.

PROPERTY RIGHTS - About one third of the world's women are homeless or live in slums; women own about 2 percent of all land but produce half the food grown; in many societies the right to own and inherit property is neglected.

AIDS-In Africa, more than 57 percent of the HIV/AIDS victims are women; in eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America, the proportion of women infected is rising; more than half of all new HIV infections are among young people, aged 15-24; rates among girls aged 15-19 are five times higher than boys the same age, in part due to forced early marriages to older men, a widespread practice in south Asia and Africa.

MATERNAL MORTALITY - In developing nations, a woman dies from complications in pregnancy or childbirth every minute for a total of 529,000 each year. The risk of an African woman dying from pregnancy related complications is 1 in 16 compared to 1 in 4,000 in industrial nations, in part due to lack of obstetric service; girls 15-19 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or child birth than women aged 20-24.

TRAFFICKING - 90 percent of foreign sex workers in the Balkans are victims of trafficking; at least 700,000 people, mostly women and children are trafficked each year across international borders; girls as young as 13 from Asia and Eastern Europe are trafficked as "mail-order brides."

ABORTION - At least 70,000 deaths occur each year from the 20 million or so unsafe abortions. Many victims are adolescent girls and young women. In Chile, Mexico and the Caribbean, studies indicate that adolescent mothers will have more children than those who start childbearing later.

WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT-

According to data collected by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on women in law-making positions in 185 countries, the highest number of women legislators is in Rwanda with 48.8 percent, followed by Sweden with 45.3 per cent and Norway with 38.2 per cent. Vietnam ranks highest among Asian countries with 27.3 per cent, that then drop off, with Malaysia 122nd, Bhutan 125th, India 130th, Thailand 134th, Japan 136th, Nepal 146th, Sri Lanka 153rd. Germany ranks 13th but Britain is 57th, the US is 71st and France is 86th. While China's Vice-Premier is a woman, Wu Yi, and the Philippine's President is a woman, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, China ranks 43rd and the Philippines 70th.

Some controversies:

There was some criticism of the UN. Some women's organizations criticized Secretary-General Kofi Annan for not honoring his own commitments to gender equality in the U.N. system.

Charlotte Bunch of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership said of Annan, "What he said (about gender equality) was good, but he did not deal with what he himself would do at the United Nations." Bunch called for more women at decision-making levels in the UN system, and upgrading divisions and departments dealing with women's issues. A coalition had previously requested Annan to appoint more high-level staff to work on gender issues.

Carol Bellamy, outgoing director of UNICEF, expressed disappointment at the lack of top level positions held by women. Jessica Neuwirth, president of the New York-based Equality Now, agreed, and said a woman should be considered for nomination as the next UN Secretary General, and called for conformity to UN Resolution 1325 urging the Secretary-General to appoint more women as special representatives and high levels of decision-making within the UN system.

The resolution called for 50-50 gender parity in the U.N. system by the year 2000, yet women number less than 20 percent of under-secretaries-generals in Annan's top management group, and only 4 of 60 special representatives personally appointed by Annan to oversee political and humanitarian crises worldwide.

The Platform for Action adopted by 189 member states at the 1995 Beijing conference on women called for developing mechanisms to nominate women candidates for appointment to senior posts in the United Nations. It was noted that the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), has lower status in the UN Development Programme (UNDP) than a regional bureau.

In response, a senior U.N. official blamed member states for the current state of affairs,

saying, "When we ask them to nominate candidates, most of them rarely or ever come up with women candidates," he said, adding that several requests for women peacekeepers have never had any positive responses from member states.

Angela King, a former U.N. special adviser on gender issues, supported his point, asking, "Why has the General Assembly had only two women presidents? (Vijay Lakshmi Pandit of India and Angie Brooks of Liberia). Why are so few women still involved around the peace table? Why is it so difficult to have gender perspectives included in conference outcomes and action programmes?"

Another controversy centered around women's reproductive rights but was resolved when the United States delegation withdrew its insistence on an anti-abortion amendment, after lack of support. Support had come from Costa Rica, Qatar, Egypt, Nicaragua, Panama and the Vatican. The Vatican objected to references to women's reproductive rights that might be read to allow abortion and complained that the conference declaration didn't put sufficient emphasis on motherhood. Vatican delegate Mary Ann Dantuono was booed when she said that she would have preferred a "clearer statement emphasizing that the Beijing documents cannot be interpreted as creating new human rights including the right to abortion."

The action platform does recognize that women's fertility rights are directly connected to their empowerment, and calls for nations to "ensure equal access to and equal treatment of women and men in education and health care, and enhance women's sexual and reproductive health as well as education."

University of Hong Kong social scientist Vivienne Wee said, "The religious right in the US in the past 10 years and fundamentalist groups in the Islamic world have become stronger... Women are caught between two forces."

Marieluise Beck, the German government's commissioner for migration and refugees who also deals with women's issues, said that in Germany, some Muslim immigrants have questioned whether women are equal, "so for us it's really important coming back that we can keep telling those institutions, those Islamic institutes for example, that there is no doubt men and women are equal."

Another criticism was leveled at liberal capitalism, under which governments were increasingly giving up state responsibilities, such as providing child care and help for the elderly, and handing them to families and to women, already in the workforce, who were often landed with the extra tasks.

Another debate was over a proposed global ban on prostitution that the US said would help stop trafficking of women and sexual tourism. Other governments opposed this strategy, saying that criminalization drives prostitution underground and denies women access to healthcare and protection against violence.

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Forums. A forum was held in the Thai capital, Bangkok, to address the problems facing women survivors of December's tsunami. Cholpon Akmatova, of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development said, "The Indian Ocean tsunami... has produced some very gender-specific aftershocks, ranging from women giving birth in unsafe conditions to increased cases of rape and abuse." There had been speculation in Sweden, world leader in women's rights, that the country's first feminist party would be launched – that the Prime Minister warned against, saying it might stimulate unwanted policies.

Other reports released in conjunction with the meeting:

A report from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: the 2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration. Women increasingly migrate as their families' key wage-earners and by themselves, but they are also being exploited in sex trafficking rings. About 90 million, or 49 percent, of the world's international migrants are women, up from 46 percent 40 years ago. The United States still receives the most international migrants, with 35 million in 2000, followed by Russia, with 13 million, and Germany, with 7 million. The report said, "At no time in human history have as many women been on the move as today." Migration can be an empowering experience, but immigration laws often still discriminate against women, by requiring pregnancy tests, barring emigration without permission of a guardian, or denying women permission to get husbands and children to join them. Some of their jobs as immigrants are unregulated, including domestic work.

The exploitation of refugees and impoverished women has gained new attention since allegations surfaced last year that U.N. peacekeepers were sexually abusing women and children in Congo. There has long been evidence of such abuse in other missions as well.

Recommendations include: gender sensitive measures as hiring female interviewees, interviewing women separately from their husbands, and setting up education so migrant women know their legal rights.

A report from the compiled by compiled by the Women's Environment and Development Organization, an international advocacy group based in New York, and the work of women's activists from 150 countries, was released to coincide with the conference.

Findings showed:

* The MDG goal of giving every girl and boy an elementary school education by 2005 is likely to be met everywhere but sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

* The Beijing platform to make reproductive health services available to women everywhere is not fulfilled because access and affordability are still obstacles, "compounded by cultural and religious fundamentalism." Women are the highest risk of getting HIV/AIDS, "primarily because of continued patterns of sexual subordination."

* The governments' pledge to put women in decision-making positions and having 30% of government and public administration jobs filled by women is not met, as only five countries had reached 30% in 1995, 10 in 2000, and 15 in 2004. The "the dirty dozen" countries that have no women in parliament include Bahrain, Kuwait, Micronesia, Nauru,

Palau, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, United Arab Emirates and Guinea-Bissau.

