



World YWCA statement to 54th session of Commission on the Status of Women

The World YWCA joins the United Nations, the Commission on the Status of Women and organisations around the world in commemorating 15 years since the Fourth World Conference of women and the Beijing Platform for Action. Women from the YWCA movement have long been involved in contributing to the women's movement and to the United Nations efforts to promote women's rights, gender equality and women's empowerment. The twelve critical areas of Beijing Platform for Action has informed the work of YWCAs as they provided services in over 20,000 communities around the world, while advocating with governments and other stakeholders for accountability to women and girls rights and dignity.

Great advances have been made since 1995, especially in the areas of women in decision-making, laws, policies and education. According to the Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009 more women are running for public office and have access to health services including pre-natal care. More countries have revised their laws to ensure justice for women who face violence, including intimate-partner abuse. The report also shows that more girls are attending school and staying in school longer.

Despite these advances, the situation for women, young women and girls in communities is still deplorable. Although more women are elected to public office, women hold just 18.2 percent of the worlds' parliamentary seats. In developing countries half a million women die from complications during or after birth. Girls enrolment in primary school in developing and developed countries may be at the highest rate ever, yet many girls face sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination while at school. The burden of domestic tasks also affects the quality of education girls receive.

An intersectional approach to women's human rights

The global development and peace agenda stated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be achieved until women are economically, socially and political empowerment, their rights are protected and that they enjoy equal status with men. The last 15 years have shown the importance as well as inadequacies of gender mainstreaming as an approach. The next 15 years demand new approaches that build on what works while accelerating the transformative actions for women's empowerment and gender equality. The intersections of the 12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action must be addressed and future solutions must be derived from a multisectoral approach.

Adopting a strong human rights based approach ensure that gender equality is at the centre of the MDGs. Many international instruments provide member states with clear direction on how to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment. These include CEDAW, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Declaration of Commitment of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS) and the Millennium Development Goals. These documents provide further guidance on the factors and solutions that can ensure women live full lives and enjoy human rights.

Identifying linkages between BPFA, the MDGs and other instruments is crucial. As the MDGs have received great political will and high profile, the United Nations, member states and civil society must make an extra effort to draw parallels from BPFA to ensure MDGs are fulfilled with a holistic approach that addresses all factors that can improve the status of women, young women and girls, thus promoting development and reducing poverty.

Women and health

A recent WHO report shows that globally, the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age is AIDS related¹. The report also indicates that pregnancy and childbearing present major risk factors for women and girls. Promoting the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of all women and girls including the right to safe motherhood is therefore essential; a human rights approach must be adopted in addressing reproductive health.

Women make up about 50 percent of all people living with HIV, and the proportion of women infected with HIV is increasing in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America². In sub-Saharan Africa, the region most affected by AIDS, 60 percent of all adults and three out of four young people living with the virus are female³. These figures demonstrate the great personal security threat that women and young women face.

The intersectionality of SRHR, HIV and violence against women is a growing concern. Socio-economic factors and legal challenges that put many HIV-positive women at risk of violence must be addressed. Many HIV-positive women are beaten up, thrown out of their homes and lose their possessions when they disclose their HIV status with their families. Governments, international organisations and civil society must ensure that laws and policies address inequality and poverty are implemented in order to protect women from violence.

Health care services must address the global health inequities women, young women and girls face whilst recognising the intersections of services to ensure women receive appropriate health care in a respectful and non-judgemental manner.

Violence against women

Safety and security of women is crucial to development. We welcome increased focus on eliminating violence against women including the UN Secretary General's campaign. Several recent United Nations resolutions, including Security Council resolution 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889, show commitment to end women's vulnerability, especially in conflict areas. These resolutions must be implemented.

Women face the risk of violence at every stage of the lifecycle. Up to 70 percent of women experience physical or sexual violence from men in their lifetime—the majority from husbands, intimate partners or someone they knowⁱ. Among women aged 15 – 44, acts of violence cause more death and disability than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combinedⁱⁱ.

An estimated 150 million girls under 18 suffered some form of sexual violence in 2002 aloneⁱⁱⁱ. A recent World Health Organisation study found that many women said their first sexual experience was not consensual. Creative solutions are needed to reach, protect and empower girls and young women.

The World YWCA welcomes the advancement governments are taking worldwide to reform legal systems in order to tackle violence against women, as directed by CEDAW. A 2003 UNIFEM study shows that rape and sexual assault are widely recognised as crime, but advancement is needed in instituting legislation on marital rape and sexual harassment. Over 120 countries worldwide have legislations on sexual assault, but only 43 have legislation on marital rape.

Enforcement of law must be ensured and member states must expand gender responsive justice system to facilitate women's access to legal system. Governments, international organisations and civil society must ensure that laws and policies that uphold women's human rights are enforced in order to protect women from violence.

¹ WHO Women and Health: today's evidence tomorrow's agenda. 2009. Switzerland, Pg39

² UNAIDS. Report on the global AIDS epidemic: executive summary. 2008. Pg 7

³ UNAIDS, World Health Organization. 2007. AIDS epidemic update.

Women in power and decision-making

Fifteen years after Beijing more women are in politics and positions of power. Women in national assemblies has accelerated from 11.6 percent in 1995 to 18.4 percent in 2008⁴. From 1975 – 1995 the rate of increase was less than one percent according to UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009 report. But women still lag behind set goals. To ensure goals are met, governments must engage women at all levels of society.

It is important to address women's access to political power, but women's leadership at community level is also crucial to achieve development goals and end poverty. Governments must include women more and partner with NGOs to achieve goal.

Young women are especially important for leadership. Youth engagement leads to youth development and youth development contributes to the health of vibrant and inclusive communities.

Recommendations

The World YWCA calls on the Commission on Status of Women to:

1. Invest in women and girls: Adequate and accessible funding must be provided for services that provide holistic solutions to the factors that prevent gender equality and women's empowerment.
2. Ensure the safety and security of women and girls: Create safe spaces, to ensure the physical, sexual and psychological safety of women and girls in all aspects of their lives.
3. Involve women: All women including women working at the community level, young women and women living with HIV must be meaningfully involved in relevant decision-making, respecting their right to self-determination and enabling their participation in developing strategies to overcome the challenges they face.
4. Expand access to comprehensive services: Through a lifecycle and multisectoral approach ensure women and girls have access to information and services they need to live healthy lives.
5. Promote women's leadership: Women from all sectors of society should be equitably represented at all levels in national, political, executive, legislative and judicial structures.
6. Keep promises made: Commitments made on HIV and AIDS, SRHR, VAW must be respected and laws that promote gender equality and eliminate violence against women enforced as directed by CEDAW.

ⁱ [WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women 2005](#)

ⁱⁱ [World Health Organization 1997](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ UNIFEM Unite to end violence Fact Sheet 2008