

Article the Guardian: Global goals on women's rights are a pale imitation of promises made in Beijing

The sustainable development goal on gender has been widely hailed, yet its pledges fall far short of those made in the 1995 Beijing declaration

The [2030 agenda for sustainable development](#) is [being hailed](#) as a landmark achievement for women's rights and gender equality. But the adoption of the [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs) this weekend, featuring celebrity-studded side events and thousands of observers, threatens to overshadow – and perhaps even undermine – the 20th anniversary of a much more significant global agenda for women's rights: the [Beijing declaration and platform for action](#).

Much has been made of the new goal dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, which includes targets to end discrimination against women and gender-based violence, ensure the full participation of women in all levels of public decision-making, and give appropriate value to unpaid care and domestic work. These commitments are, unquestionably, a vital starting point in the battle against inequality. But they fall far short of those made in the Beijing platform, which required governments, the private sector, financial institutions, donors and civil society to advance 50 strategic objectives covering 12 “critical areas of concern”, including poverty, health, education, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision-making, the environment, the media, and women's rights institutions.

Sustainable development goals must fulfil Beijing's vision for women

Some of these pledges look visionary when compared with the promises made to women and girls in the SDGs. Where the new goals aim broadly for equal access to justice, the Beijing agreement specifically commits governments to ensuring access to free or low-cost legal services designed to reach women living in poverty.

Where the SDGs speak vaguely of promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, the Beijing agreement requires governments to reduce excessive military expenditure and control the availability of arms. Where the SDGs include general targets on decent work and reducing income inequality, the Beijing agreement recognises the right of female workers to organise and states the key role of collective bargaining in eliminating wage inequality. And where the SDGs require governments to reduce illicit financial flows, the Beijing agreement requires governments to analyse and adjust macroeconomic policies, including taxation and external debt policy, from a gender perspective “to promote a more equitable distribution of productive assets, wealth, opportunities, income and services”.

The objectives of Beijing were consistent with a recognition of the deeply structural nature of the inequalities experienced by women. By openly challenging austerity programmes and the impact of macroeconomic policies on women, the platform acknowledged that the [neoliberal, “trade not aid” model](#) of development was – and is – failing the majority of the world's women. Despite the intervening impact of two global financial crises, [rocketing wealth inequality](#), growing fundamentalisms, and a steadily worsening [climate crisis](#), the SDGs fail even to match the Beijing agreement's level of ambition, let alone build on it to meet our current challenges.

In fact, there is scope this weekend for governments to weaken the SDGs further by outlining reservations to the targets when they speak at the [sustainable development summit](#). Given the objections to targets on early and forced marriage and unpaid care work that were voiced by governments during negotiations, it's likely that these are the sorts of targets that will be subject to reservations, even when similar or stronger commitments already exist in agreements like the one set out in Beijing.

There is therefore a danger that the SDGs may directly undermine the Beijing accord. Indeed, while governments will speak at length during the three-day sustainable development summit, the 20-year review of the Beijing agreement is being marked by voluntary three-minute "commitment statements" by governments squeezed into a [day's event](#) on Sunday.

What this makes clear is that, rather than new commitments from governments in the SDGs, we need accountability for the promises made 20 years ago in Beijing. This absence of accountability is one of the greatest weaknesses in the UN system, and the review process for the SDGs is not going to change that. Governments won't agree to reporting their progress unless the process for doing so is voluntary and led by governments.

The Beijing agreement is not a perfect roadmap for the realisation of gender equality and women's rights – like the SDGs, it doesn't go far enough in protecting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, or challenging global economic structures that rely on the exploitation of women and the environment to generate wealth. But it offers a more progressive vision than any other global political commitment of the past 20 years, and governments must not be allowed to forget that.

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