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Op-Ed

Reflections and Recommendations on Public Policy for the year 2019

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Is Lebanon Ready for Beijing Plus 25? A Critical Process and a Need for Strong Feminist Voices

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In November 1994, I accompanied my feminist mentor, Dr. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, to an event which was probably the turning point of my ensuing feminist activism. Back then, the MENA region was preparing for what was to become the last UN Conference on Women which was held in Beijing in September 1995. The event was the regional Amman preparatory NGO Forum which was supposed to bring in the voices of civil society into the global UN IVth Conference on Women (subsequently referred to as the Beijing Conference).

Whereas the Amman NGO Forum platform was supposedly a platform for NGOs, feminist organizations from the region had to fight hard to make their voices heard as the space was filled with outfits that were technically NGOs/CSOs but were in fact affiliated to governments and/or conservative as well as faith-based organizations. The tensions were significant but the feminist voices were strong, often united and unapologetically defiant of governments

and religious institutions. A case in point was the formidable coalition, Collectif Maghreb-Égalité 95, a tight-knit network of feminist organizations and individuals from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia calling for the reform of religious family laws in the three countries. In addition, the Arab Women Court initiated in Lebanon was another regional structure which campaigned for laws to protect women from violence and which succeeded in bringing this issue to the forefront of the deliberations in both Amman and Beijing. The global context was rather conducive to such important feminist debates. Indeed, during that same period, [The World Conference on Human Rights](#) (Vienna, 1993) and the [International Conference on Population and Development](#) (Cairo, 1994) were important and powerful milestones which brought about an international recognition of women's rights as human rights and of violence against women as a violation of human rights. These affirmations were a significant gain for global women and feminist movements and a good augur of the outcome of the Beijing Conference.

When the world gathered in Beijing in September 1995, we witnessed a formidable and unprecedented galvanization of women's voices for equality, development, and peace (the three pillars of Beijing). Over two weeks, 4995 official delegates from 189 countries in consultation with 4035 representatives from 2602 NGOs and with the presence of 3,245 members of the press and some five thousand staff from UN and international agencies as observers¹, co-created the [Beijing Platform for Action](#).

At last, there was a roadmap for gender equality with shared milestones and local, regional, and global plans of actions with concurrent reporting and accountability mechanisms. Institutional settings were put in place (what became to be known as "National Women Machineries"), responsibilities were attributed, and resources were allocated including significant investment in building skills and organizational setups for "gender mainstreaming".

A "Beijing moment" happened and some lucky 20,000 women and men were part of this global co-creation. Yet, this moment and its euphoria were short-lived. Global conflicts, financial crisis, and political shifts to the right and to more conservative regimes meant that military security took precedence over human rights. The fact that the Beijing Platform for Action and the preceding [Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (ratified by Lebanon in 1996) are non-binding documents did not help in making women's rights a reality despite progress in reforms of the letter of the law.

Now, twenty four years later after Beijing, the signal for the Beijing plus 25 Global NGO Forum was given last week at the [Tunis Forum for Gender Equality](#). Five hundred delegates (mostly NGOs) from 80 countries gathered in Tunis (April 24th till 26th) to begin a preparation process that will ultimately culminate in a Global NGO Forum which is likely to convene in the summer of 2020. The aim of the 2020 convening is to give a new life and impetus to the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), as well as create a meaningful inter-generational dialogue between women who were part of the earlier world conferences on women and a younger generation whose input and contribution is critical in order to shape a feminist future. This Global NGO Forum, now referred to as Beijing plus 25 (in celebration of the 25th anniversary of Beijing Conference), is expected to produce a document which will reflect the aspirations of women worldwide in the form of a new roadmap towards rights and equality. UNWomen, the main convener of this event, is expected to process and channel the demands of women, from Tunis to Beijing plus 25, to the UN General Assembly which will be held in September 2020.

The roadmap to Beijing plus 25 is both exciting and fraught with risks. Indeed, not enough preparation time or resources are available. The global erosion of human rights, as well as strong conservative political and societal trends, will act as powerful and aggressive deterrent to progress toward equality. This is particularly true for Lebanon as up till now, there are very little signs of serious preparations or a robust feminist agenda.

What can we do to influence the process?

- **Research the history of the series of UN Conferences on Women:** How did they happen, what were the challenges, what were the outcomes, who were the actors?
- **Engage with local, regional and global women organizations** who have been part of these processes. Inter-generational dialogue and connection are conditions sine qua none for progress.
- **Find out how the government is preparing for this conference,** and open channels of communication with concerned officials and public institutions for better and more informed preparation.
- **Engage in parallel reporting** with bodies that are creating spaces and tools for solid NGOs reporting to provide their views, facts, analysis and insights on the realities of women on the ground.
- **Actively engage in local and regional consultations** which will be organized shortly in Lebanon and in the MENA region.
- **Create feminist research and knowledge** especially around critical issues that were omitted in the Beijing process. This includes expanding the definition of gender which in 1995 was seen as a binary.
- **Mobilize and organize** to be present, active, and disruptive in all these spaces and emerging opportunities which are likely to be hostile to women's rights and equality.

¹ "The Real Story of Beijing," in off our backs, Vol. 26, No. 3, March 1996, pp. 1, 8-11, 22-27

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