

Reflections on Experiences at World Conferences on Women:
Beijing & Beijing+5

For Beijing +10

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I attended the Beijing Conference as an NGO representative for WorldWIDE (World Women in Development and Environment), participating primarily in the events held at the NGO Forum in Huairou.

This was the first women's conference when faxes and the Internet were able to play a major role in mobilizing participants for a major conference. Technology was finally working for women! Nonetheless, gaining access for an NGO to the United Nations was not easy and required vigilance and persistence.

It was fascinating to see the role being played by the NGOs in helping to craft the final Beijing Platform. Government representatives quickly realized that they were not experts and needed the assistance of the specialist NGOs. That was an empowering realization!

Beijing + 5 – 2000

By the time of the Beijing+5 event, I was working for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and was thus able to see yet another perspective on major women's conferences.

One very successful event sponsored by WFP on behalf of the UN was a major session featuring five of the female UN heads of agency. As Catherine Bertini was then the Executive Director of WFP, it was easy to gain her support for such an event. What could have been a dry and dull session turned out to be very popular and enticing, due to the candor and informality of the women on the podium. None tried to dominate; all shared humorous and personal stories. It was a treat to see them in this mode !

WFP also prepared an analysis of progress made towards achieving its five Commitments to Women, launched by Mrs. Bertini at the Beijing Conference. These represented a major effort to lay down a marker for change at WFP.

A summary of that analysis follows:

Commitment I: Provide Direct Access for Women to Appropriate and Adequate Food

- In 26% of WFP-assisted relief activities, at least 80% of the food recipients at the distribution point were women, thus achieving the target.

Steps to achieve this target included the following:

- Identifying partners to target women in food distribution;
- Improving gender disaggregated data;
- Training in gender and on the Commitments to Women;
- Including both names on ration cards, not just the head of household; and
- Giving preference to women.

Reasons for failing to achieve the target included:

- Long distance to food distribution points;
- Lack of security, making it unsafe for women to travel alone;
- Women's unwillingness to leave children alone for a long time;
- Difficulties for government counterparts and local administrations in implementing the Commitments to Women; and
- Cultural and traditional barriers limiting women's mobility.

- Two-thirds of all WFP-assisted activities addressed micronutrient deficiencies of vulnerable groups, including women; and local eating and cooking habits were considered in more than 90% of WFP activities.

Food baskets usually included vitamins and/or fortified foods, such as iodized salt, vegetable oil fortified with Vitamin A, enriched flour, corn-soya-blend drink, or fortified maize meal. Women were also encouraged to attend training on hygiene and nutrition at health centers. Furthermore, when the preparation/cooking for the distributed food was not familiar, women were given training and/or a handbook.

Commitment II: Women's Equal Participation in Power Structures and Decision-making

- WFP worked with women on committees in 83% of all assisted activities, with women identifying beneficiaries, managing food, and selecting food-for-work assets and projects. Where women did not participate actively on committees, it was usually due to cultural and religious barriers.

The participation of women on committees had a positive effect on the outcome. Examples include: better identification and targeting of the most vulnerable; eased contact with beneficiaries; improved supervision and efficiency of the food distribution; increase in the number of women as food recipients; increase in activities that contribute to improving the conditions for women and children, through health, nutrition and education; greater women's empowerment, setting role models for girls;

improved hygiene conditions; increased female participation in training courses; increased girls' enrolment in school; and improved household food security.

- Women were participating in leadership positions in two-thirds of WFP-assisted activities. Where women had a strong leading role, it was usually where women comprised 100% of the committee members.

WFP did a lot to empower women to participate more effectively on committees, usually through partnership with other organizations, including:

- Training on gender roles and relations; hygiene, health and nutrition; leadership and management skills; agricultural techniques; and literacy;
 - Income generating activities and rural credit for women;
 - Promotion of women's participation in decision-making; and
 - Self-esteem activities.
- The proportion of women among international professional staff increased from 18% in 1992 to 25% in 1996 to 36% in 2000.

To achieve this goal, Country Offices had given priority to women in the recruitment/employment processes; provided staff with equal opportunities in promotion and career development; gave training in sexual harassment and security; encouraged spouse employment; and provided part-time opportunities for staff. Both female and male staff members were given opportunities to work in non-traditional roles.

Commitment III: Women's Equal Access to Resources, Employment, Markets and Trade

- 44% of WFP's Country Offices had achieved the target of allocating at least 60% of their development resources to women and girls to reduce the gender gap.
- Nearly half (49%) of WFP's Country Offices had achieved the target of allocating at least 50% of their education resources to girls, targeting girls through school feeding, take-home rations, residential schools, and food-for-work to render schools more girl-friendly. Women are also targeted in non-formal education programmes, as educated women are more likely to send their daughters to school.
- In over one quarter (27%) of the WFP-assisted food-for-work activities, women comprised more than half of the workers.
- Women participated in decision-making about asset creation and work in 84 % of food-for-work activities.
- Women were reported to control the assets created in 76% of food-for-work activities, although only 19% of Country Offices reported that women controlled assets at least equally with men.

Commitment IV: Generation and Dissemination of Gender-disaggregated Data

- Country Offices collected and reported gender-disaggregated information on most development activities (85%-96%), although fewer did so in relief and emergency situations (48%-72%).

Commitment V: Accountability on Actions Taken

- Most WFP Country Offices addressed the Commitments to Women in the design of their activities (84%) and in the contractual agreements with partners (89%).
- Over half (58%) had systems in place to meet the Commitments to Women and mainstream attention to gender on a routine basis.
- One-fifth (22%) had imposed conditionalities on activities based on the Commitments. Assistance to some counterparts had been stopped because they did not meet gender requirements.

The overall conclusions of the analysis showed that WFP's food assistance raised household income, improved food security, reduced workloads for women, increased school enrolment of girls, increased attendance at health centers by women, empowered women, enhanced skills through literacy training and income-generating activities, improved nutrition status, created assets for women, strengthened women's leadership, and helped communities to recognize the important role of women.

Some problems were reported, nonetheless, including:

- Increase in women's workload without a proportional increase of work by men;
- Inability to employ female staff due to cultural and traditional barriers;
- Illiteracy among women, limiting their technical expertise and management capacities; and
- Perception of inappropriateness of hard manual labor for women.

The Commitments to Women, and the good results, began to change attitudes toward women at WFP and toward the importance of gender mainstreaming in order to achieve WFP's overall goal of enhanced food security. The analysis prepared for the Beijing +5 event was supplemented in 2000-2001 by more in-depth country studies, consultations, and evaluations to allow for the redefinition of the Commitments to Women as Enhanced Commitments to Women imbedded in a new Gender Policy (2003-2007).

Part of its implementation strategy includes central funding for up to 50% of WFP's 80+ Country Offices and all six Regional Offices, to be facilitated by trained WFP staff, both male and female, to carry out the training. Many obstacles remain but the political will has definitely improved as a result of the UN conferences.

P.S. A personal note:

I had had the unique opportunity to be able to bring my mother (age 78) and my French foreign daughter (age 21) to the Beijing Conference. Three generations, sharing the same experiences ! My two companions came to the four sessions World WIDE was running and helped document and photograph the events.

For my Mom, this was the first time she had been away from my Dad for more than a weekend.. and he “gave her permission” to leave him ! For my French daughter, she had never been beyond Europe and adjusted brilliantly to her bicycle, her Chinese noodles and the language, learning a few words even the very first day.

This was a seminal experience in all of our lives, changing all three of us forever.