

Critical Next Steps in Enhancing Women's Equality and Empowerment

Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury

[InDepth News](#)



"I am proud to be a feminist ... all of us need to be. That is how we make our planet a better place to live for all," writes Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations. He is an internationally recognized initiator of the UNSCR 1325 as the President of the UN Security Council in March 2000. He is the Founder of the Global Movement for The Culture of Peace (GMCoP), a civil society entity promoting the UN Declaration and Programme Action on Culture of Peace.

NEW YORK (IDN) - The year 2017 is experiencing a ground-swell of much-needed mobilization by women to assert their rights and claiming their due role in contributing to global efforts for a better life for all. The Women's March in Washington DC on January 21 with a million protesters worldwide was emphatic in its demand for equality joined in solidarity by hundreds of "sister marches" held around the U.S. and the globe. On March 18, more than 10,000 women and men took to the streets of Zurich in protest against sexism and racism and stood up for gender equality. As a reaction to the rollback of women's rights worldwide, the new activist alliance WE CAN'T KEEP QUIET was founded in Switzerland.

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Last April, the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom \(WILPF\)](#) organized a high profile gathering in Geneva under the forward-looking title "Reclaiming the United Nations as a Peace Organization: Ensuring women's meaningful participation for peace and strengthening multilateralism" which explored "how local women's voices for peace are central to meaningful participation" owing to shrinking spaces and "new ways of working together to put grassroots women's voices central for peace".

Women leading anti-nuclear mobilization

The upcoming march and rally on June 17 in New York City and around the world to "Support the UN in Adopting a Treaty to Ban Nuclear Weapons" organized by [The Women's March to Ban the Bomb](#), a women-led initiative building on the momentum of movements at the forefront of the *challenge of cultivating a political consensus around the view that nuclear weapons are so singularly inhumane we ought categorically to reject their use, whatever purposes they may be said to serve*. They have asserted that "A world without nuclear weapons is not only possible, but a necessity to our human survival. Humanity has the right to live with dignity, free from the fear and threat of nuclear annihilation."

That brings back the memories of one of the most famous gatherings of women held in 1982 at the University of California to protest nuclear weapons on the Mother's Day which was observed on May 14 worldwide. Too few Americans are aware that the annual Mother's Day in the United States originally envisioned it as a day of peace when social justice advocate Julia Ward Howe issued in 1870 her inspired Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace, which called upon mothers of all nationalities to band together to protest against war and to meet to discuss the means whereby to achieve world peace.

It has been seen time and again that women have historically played leading roles in movements for peace and social justice. In 1915, a unique group of women met in an International Congress in The Hague, Netherlands to protest against World War I and to prevent war in the future. Out of this meeting, the world's leading organization for peace and equality, WILPF was established. Women have been at the forefront of the anti-nuclear resistance since the beginning of the nuclear age. WILPF was one of the first civil society groups to condemn the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Women were leaders in the campaign to ban nuclear weapon testing in the United States. Women led the Nuclear Freeze movement in the 1980s, calling on the Soviet Union and United States to stop the arms race. In both governments and civil society, women have been the most present and vocal in campaigning for a total prohibition of the bomb.

Four World Women's Conferences, UNSCR 1325 and SDG 5

In its objective of realizing and ensuring women's rights, during last four decades, the international community organized four world conferences on women under the United Nations umbrella in Mexico City, in Copenhagen, in Nairobi and in Beijing, adopted UN Security Council's history-making resolution 1325 on women and Peace and Security and agreed on the inclusion of an autonomous, self-standing goal for women's equality and empowerment in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, commonly referred to as the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). This package of 17 global goals was adopted by the UN in September 2015 covering the most prominent and complex challenges facing our planet with a 15-year time frame for their achievement.

Progress Stalled – Rollback of Gains – Targeted Pushback

Notwithstanding all these remarkable milestones, we are experiencing around the globe an organized, determined rollback of these gains as well as new attacks on women equality and empowerment – yes, in all parts of the world and in all countries without exception. As

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underscored by the architect of feminist foreign policy, Foreign Minister Margot Wallström of Sweden, “No society is immune from backlashes, especially not in relation to gender. There is a continuous need for vigilance and for continuously pushing for women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights.”

One wonders whether the global efforts to come out of the patriarchal culture of our societies and consolidating the progress made in the right direction, albeit slow, are faltering. Are we stalled or even moving backwards in ensuring that equality and empowerment? Also we know that the challenges to women’s rights and their equality not only continue, but those also mutate and reappear, undermining any hard-earned progress – of course in the process, those become more complex, more complicated and more difficult to overcome. It is a reality that “... borders are closing across the world, blocking women from the Global South both from seeking refuge, having a voice and working on global gender justice”.

We have also noticed that euphoria of women following the fall of their regressive regimes in the Middle East was short-lived. Targeted and brutal pushback is happening there. Activist women find themselves lost with no pockets of support from society which fail to recognize how in countless ways, women hold the key to a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Middle East. Unfortunately the emerging male-dominated leaderships there seem to forget that “democracy without equality in all aspects of the law and full participation of 50% of the population is another form of authoritarianism.”

Patriarchy and Misogyny – Humanity’s Dual Scourge

Patriarchy and misogyny are scourges pulling back the humanity away from our aspiration for a better world to live in freedom, equality and justice. We need not waste time digging into statistical labyrinth to show that women are unequal. Gender inequality is an established, proven and undisputed reality – it is all pervasive. It is a real threat to human progress!

Unless we confront these vicious and obstinate negative forces with all our energy, determination and persistence, our planet will never be a desired abode for one and all. I will emphasize in that connection that none of the 17 SDGs will make headway in any real sense, until we make progress in realizing the objective of women’s equality and empowerment.

It is by and large accepted that gender equality is a fundamental matter of human rights, democracy and social justice. But overwhelming evidence shows that it is also a precondition for sustainable growth, welfare, peace and security. Increasing gender equality has positive effects on food security, extremism, health, education and numerous other key global concerns.

Through my life’s experience and inspiration, I believe intensely that we should never forget that when women – half of world’s seven point two billion people - are marginalized, there is no chance for our world to get distributive development and sustainable peace in the real sense. A key target of SDGoal 5 is to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and it calls for ensuring “women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life”. Progress in women becoming truly an equal partner with men at all decision-making levels will contribute to the achievement of all the other SDGs.

United Nations and women’s equality

As we all know, the Charter of the United Nations, when signed in 1945, was the first international agreement to affirm the principle of equality between women and men. A specific part of the preamble of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) continues to inspire me every time I read it. It says that “... *Convinced that the full and*

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complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields...” Another milestone UN resolution adopted by consensus in 1999 – Declaration and Programme of Action on Culture of Peace – accords a place of prominence for “equality between women and men” among its eight action areas.

In another resolution in 2011 on political participation UN General Assembly asserted that *“Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.”*

That global reality is dramatically evidenced in the fact that only one in five Parliamentarians is a woman, and there are nearly 40 countries in which women account for less than ten percent of Parliamentarians. This marginalization of women from the political sphere is unfortunate and unacceptable. As I always strongly emphasize, empowering women’s political leadership will have ripple effects on every level of society and the global condition. When politically empowered, women bring important and different skills and perspectives to the policy making table in comparison to their male counterparts. When women join politics, they want to do something, when men join politics, they want to be something.

I recall Eleanor Roosevelt’s words saying “Too often the great decisions are originated and given shape in bodies made up wholly of men, or so completely dominated by them that whatever of special value women have to offer is shunted aside without expression.” It is a reality that politics, more so security, is a man’s world.

Reiterating this assertion, UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his message on the International Women’s Day [said](#) very succinctly that “The truth is that north and south, east and west – and I’m not speaking about any society, culture or country in particular – everywhere, we still have a male-dominated culture.”

At a UN high level event couple of years ago, President of Liberia Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf – first woman head of state in the continent of Africa - pointed out that “... some of us have broken the glass ceiling” at the same time regretting that “at the current pace, it will take 81 years to achieve gender equality.”

At a recent conference on “Women in power and decision-making: Building a different world”, the leading participants emphasized that *“It is not about men against women, but there is evidence to show through research that when you have more women in public decision-making, you get policies that benefit women, children and families in general.”*

Talking of political participation, the United Nations’ own record is not something which we can be proud of. To assist UN move in the right direction and assert its credibility, in September 2012, a “Call to Action” was issued to world leaders gathering at the UN by IMPACT Leadership 21 – and reiterated in 2016 - asking for urgent action in four areas [http://www.impactleadership21.com/uploads/1/0/1/6/10163822/impact_leadership_21_call_to_action_to_world_leaders_attending_71st_unga_session_19_september_2016.pdf]:

1. Appointment of a Woman as the Next UN Secretary-General. In its more than seven decades of existence, the world body has not elected any woman to that post.
2. Nomination of Women as Future Presidents of the General Assembly. Out of its 193 member-states, only three women were elected as the Assembly President.
3. Election of More Women as Heads of Various UN Governing Bodies

4. Appointment by Member-states of More Women as Ambassadors to the UN in New York and Geneva.

Women's participation is a game-changer

Positive benefits of women's equality of participation are very significantly experienced in the area of peace and security. The contribution and involvement of women in the eternal quest for peace is an inherent reality. Women are the real agents of change in refashioning peace structures ensuring greater sustainability. That has been reiterated again, among other actions, by "Women Cross DMZ" which is a movement of women working globally for peace in Korea. Two years ago on the 70th anniversary of the division of Korea, the group walked with 10,000 Korean women and crossed the DMZ from North to South Korea to draw global attention to the urgent need to put an end to the Korean tension, reunite divided families, and ensure women's leadership in peacebuilding.

My own experience particularly during last quarter century has made it clear to me that the participation of women in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding assures that their experiences, priorities, and solutions contribute to longer-term stability and inclusive governance. In their inclusion in peace negotiations, women invariably ensure that peace accords address the validity of gender equality in new constitutional, judicial and electoral structures.

1325 is much more than just four numerals

That brings me to the [United Nations Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 1325](#) on women and peace and security adopted in October 2000. Like many, I was very encouraged that in choosing the three women laureates for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, the citation referred to 1325 saying that "It underlined the need for women to become participants on an equal footing with men in peace processes and in peace work in general." The Nobel Committee further asserted that "We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society." This is the first time a UN resolution has been quoted so specifically by its number in any Nobel citation.

Here I would pay tribute to the [Soka Gakkai International](#) President Daisaku Ikeda, the venerable global peace leader and ardent champion for women's equality, for his strong support to the full implementation of 1325. He has articulated convincingly that "The significance of the resolution lies above all in the fact that it was a declaration to the world at the threshold of the twenty-first century that women's involvement is essential if lasting peace is to be realized."

Follow up decisions by the Security Council called on the countries to prepare National Action Plan (NAP) for implementation of 1325 which was initiated as a result of the statement issued by the Council on March 8, 2000, International Women's Day. In his [2017 Peace Proposal](#) which is being issued annually on January 26 since 1983, President Ikeda wrote that "The statement noted the inextricable link between peace and gender equality, transforming the impression of women as helpless victims of wars and conflicts... This paradigm shift led to the adoption of Resolution 1325, opening a sure path for the greater participation of women in peace processes." He also adds that "After the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the most significant and potentially far-reaching turning point [on women's equality] was the adoption of Resolution 1325 ..." [UN Women](#) having the lead in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 should take advantage of the fact that adoption of 1325 has opened a much-awaited door of opportunity for women.

The main inspiration behind 1325 is not to make war safe for women but to structure the peace in a way that there is no recurrence of war and conflict. We would not have to be worrying about countering extremism if women have equality in decision-making enabling them to take measures

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which would prevent such extremism. Ensuring equality and inclusion, mutual respect and fairness in international relations is essential to weed out roots of extremism.

Another disappointing dimension in this context is that the existing international policies and practices make women insecure and deny their equality of participation basically as a result of their support of the existing militarized inter-state security arrangements. I am referring to the concept of security based on the traditional, outmoded strategic power structure rather than on human security which highlights the security of the people.

In real terms, National Action Plan (NAP) is the engine that would speed up the implementation of Resolution 1325. All countries are obligated as per decisions of the Security Council to prepare the NAP. So far, only 63 out of 193 UN Member States have prepared their Plans – what a dismal record after 17 years. At that rate, we need over 30 years to have all 193 covered.

No more foot-dragging for Fifth Global Summit for Women

To speed up the pace of progress with regard to women's equality and empowerment, one very forward-looking initiative should be the five-year old joint proposal made by the President of the 66th session of the UN General Assembly and the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 8 March 2012 for the convening of a Global Conference on Women by the United Nations in 2015, twenty years after the last women's summit in Beijing. That proposal needs to be revived and revised to schedule the fifth women's conference in 2020, 25 years after the one in Beijing which hosted the fourth in 1995.

The rationale for such a global summit is so obvious. During the 20th anniversary of the Beijing conference, the UN Secretary-General reported that *“Progress for women in the past 20 years has been unacceptably slow, with areas of stagnation and regression.”* He lamented that *“despite some progress, world leaders have not done nearly enough to act on commitments made in the visionary Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.”* In the same context, the head of UN Women very rightly underscored that *“The disappointing gap between the norms and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action points to a collective failure of leadership on progress for women.”* Unfortunately and curiously, that joint proposal was cold-shouldered by those very countries which claim to champion women's rights and equality.

Transformative change is essential – Feminism is the key

It is now recognized that achieving gender equality requires “transformative change.” In this conceptual reorientation, the politics of gender relations and restructuring of institutions, rather than simply equality in access to resources and options, have become the focus of development architecture. We need to realize that equality is no longer only a technical and statistical perception. It is also an understanding that the views, values and experiences of women and men are different in many ways and, therefore, it is essential that both male and female views are equally heard and recognized in society as a whole, and, of course, in social, economic and political planning and decision making. Only then can women and men equally and democratically influence progress in society, which shapes the conditions and prerequisites of their lives. Thus, the equal participation and impact of women in society becomes not only their legitimate right, but also a social and political necessity for achieving more balanced and sustainable peace and development.

Women's equality and empowerment are not only issues concerning women; those are relevant for humanity as a whole – for all of us. This is most crucial point that needs to be internalized by every one of us. At the same time, we should be watchful against the increasing attempts by governments to undermine the critical and unequivocal role of women's organizations, feminist activists and women human rights defenders.

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The statement on Women's Contribution to Culture of Peace issued during the Beijing Conference concluded by reaffirming that *“Only together, women and men in parity and partnership, can we overcome obstacles and inertia, silence and frustration and ensure the insight, political will, creative thinking and concrete actions needed for a global transition from the culture of violence to the culture of peace.”*

I join humbly my voice to Foreign Minister Wallstrom's assertion on the eve of this year's International Women's Day that *“Feminism is a component of a modern view on global politics, not an idealistic departure from it. It is about smart policy which includes whole populations, uses all potential and leaves no one behind. Change is possible, necessary and long overdue.”*

I am proud to be a feminist ... all of us need to be. That is how we make our planet a better place to live for all. We should always remember that without peace, development is impossible, and without development, peace is not achievable, but without women, neither peace nor development is conceivable. [IDN-InDepthNews – 21 May 2017]

Photo: Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the United Nations. Credit: Mitsu (Eric) Kimura, SUA Archivist.