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Beijing+10: Wasted opportunity to progress women's human rights

Ten years after the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, governments unanimously reaffirmed their commitment to respect women's human rights and ensure gender equality. Amnesty International (AI) welcomes the full reaffirmation of the Beijing Platform for Action without any watering down or undermining any of the commitments contained in it. Nevertheless, it is deeply disappointing that governments at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) - the UN body charged specifically with advancing the status of women - found themselves unable or unwilling to build on and progress efforts by governments and activists alike to promote and protect women's human rights. The Declaration adopted by the 49th session of the CSW is extremely modest in scope and adds little beyond reaffirming commitments made ten years ago. The ten year review had presented a critical opportunity to progress the women's rights agenda, but sadly this has been wasted.

The Declaration reaffirms the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the outcome document of the Twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly on Women and pledges further action to ensure their full and accelerated implementation. Governments stress that full and effective implementation of these commitments is essential to achieving the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals. They also recognize that the implementation of the Beijing documents and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women.

During consultations on the draft declaration, the United States and a couple of other countries had proposed amendments aimed at weakening and undermining the commitments to realizing women's human rights. The US proposal sought to restrict the scope of the Beijing commitments by stating that these did "*not create any new international human rights*" and in particular that they did "*not include the right to abortion*". Amnesty International views this not only as an attack on sexual and reproductive rights as enshrined in the Platform for Action, but also more generally as an attempt to stifle the evolution of the human rights framework.

Organized around 12 Critical Areas of Concern, the Beijing Platform for Action sets out an extensive program to advance the status of women and strengthen the protection of their human rights. Building on the rights and principles enshrined in international human rights standards, the Platform contains important progressive language in a number of areas. In the area of sexual and reproductive rights, the Platform stipulates that women "*have the right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence*". Since the adoption of the Platform in 1995, several of the UN's human rights experts have given consistent attention to sexual and reproductive rights issues.

In a welcome move, shortly before the Declaration was adopted the United States withdrew its

amendment and the Declaration was adopted as originally drafted by the CSW Bureau.

Amnesty International welcomes the many strong statements in support of the Beijing Platform for Action following the adoption of the Declaration. Iceland said that the *"reaffirmation should be wholehearted and not grudging"*. Amnesty International shares the sentiment expressed by New Zealand, on behalf of Canada and Australia, that the Beijing Platform for Action continues to be a cornerstone of policies to realize women's human rights and that the UN must "stop going over the same old debates" and instead focus on making *"real change on the ground"* as women the world over *"were trapped in poverty and were victims of violence"*. The EU invited the UN Secretary-General to make a strong reference to the Declaration in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, and stressed the importance of guaranteeing sexual and reproductive rights in reaching the goal of gender equality.

As the CSW session draws to a close, AI urges all states to commit to ensure the accelerated implementation of the Beijing commitments, including by allocating adequate resources, to guarantee the full protection of women's human rights.

Background

In the ten year period since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, several of the UN's human rights experts have given consistent attention to sexual and reproductive rights issues. In her 2003 report, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women identified the articulation of women's sexual rights as the *"final frontier for the women's movement"*. The Special Rapporteur on the right to health noted in his 2004 report that *"the correct understanding of fundamental human rights principles, as well as existing human rights norms, leads ineluctably to the recognition of sexual rights as human rights."* The treaty monitoring bodies have repeatedly included measures aimed at the promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive rights in their recommendations to states, in concluding observations and in their general comments. They have also strongly reaffirmed the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, which was expanded by the Human Rights Committee to the area of partnership rights in the *Young v. Australia* case in 2003.