



# Comité de América Latina y El Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres

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## Brief Overview of 30 Years of the Beijing Platform for Action<sup>1</sup>

### THE STARTING POINT:

In 1995, during the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing, representatives from 198 States and nearly 30,000 feminist activists convened for almost two weeks to discuss women's rights and women's role in social, economic, cultural, and political spheres. As a result, a global commitment establishing guidelines in twelve key areas: environment; power and decision-making; girls' rights; economy; poverty; violence against women; human rights; education and training; institutional mechanisms for women's advancement; health; media; and armed conflicts was adopted: the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

This Platform proposed an advanced action plan, grounded on clear guidelines to encourage State Parties, feminist organizations, and civil society to place women's rights at the center of national agendas. The Beijing agenda also incorporated previous globally achieved agreements regarding human rights, including the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), and the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), among others (Quiroga, N. et al, 2021, p.5).

### REGIONAL CONTEXT IN THE 1990S:

Considering that many countries in the Global South had recently regained democracy after decades of authoritarian and/or dictatorial regimes; and that their democratic institutions remained fragile or unstable to face political, economic, and social crises, the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action posed significant challenges for countries within the Latin America and the Caribbean region. For example, countries like Colombia and those in Central America were undergoing peace negotiations after years of armed conflict. In this context, Colombia (1991), Paraguay (1992), Peru (1993), Venezuela (1999), and Brazil (1988) undergone engaged in complex socio-legal discussions and approved new constitutions; while others like Guatemala (1993), Argentina (1994), Panama (1994), and Nicaragua (1995) carried out significant constitutional reform processes. Within the context of these relevant political changes, significant progress in recognizing human rights, particularly, women's rights was achieved. Regionally, the Belém do Pará Convention (1995) was a milestone to seek eradication of violence against women, being incorporated, alongside multiple other International Human Rights Treaties into national legal systems, in many cases with constitutional status. Among these, the ILO Convention 169 was a major advancement for Indigenous women, by recognizing their community rights as well as their right to participate in decisions- making processes

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<sup>1</sup> This document was prepared by CLADEM within the framework of CSW-69, which commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).





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regarding their territories. In a context of increasing pressure on natural resources and historical exclusion, this convention strengthened Indigenous women's leadership allowing for their engagement at national and international levels.

By the end of the decade, Latin American and Caribbean women had achieved the recognition of their civil and political rights in most countries of the region. These rights were enshrined in national legislation and included equal access to education, work, property and income management, as well as rights related to association, divorce, parental authority, voting, and political participation. Consequently, their presence in universities and the labor market have been increasing ever since.

In politics, women began to take on a more active role, though with significant differences across countries. In those where feminist movements and women in political parties pushed for “quota laws,” female participation percentages were set in electoral lists, ranging from 25% to 40%, with 30% being the most common. While these laws were a step forward, they soon became “ceilings” that limited women’s participation beyond the established minimums. However, they helped increase female presence in decision-making spaces, especially in parliaments, where the number of female legislators grew, and women's needs and interests were also incorporated into the political agenda, laws and public policies (UN WOMEN, 2021, p. 12).

Economically, countries in the region were emerging from the so-called “lost decade” (ECLAC, 2023, p. 9) characterized by low growth, high inflation, and external debt crises. Despite this adverse context, women were massively incorporated into the labor market and productive systems throughout LAC, even if their participation remained marked by deep inequalities compared to men. The majority of women entered in professions attuned to their supposedly “natural” role, working in education, healthcare, social assistance, and customer service. In contrast, their presence in strategic fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) remained minimal.

As the decade progressed, women increasingly joined the workforce, but mostly in lower-ranking positions in both private and public sectors, facing the persistent barrier known as “sticky floors” (ONU Mujeres, 2017, citado en Quiroga et al, 2022, p.19). Female representation in leadership and decision-making positions was scarce in business, government, and unions due to the “glass ceiling.” Additionally, many women worked—and continue to work—in the informal economy, engaged in unregistered businesses and ventures (ECLAC, 2024, p.20). While these jobs often come with precarious conditions and lack labor protections, they sometimes provide flexibility to balance work with household responsibilities, which still fall predominantly on women.

In all cases, women’s participation in the labor market was not accompanied by a fair redistribution of domestic and caregiving tasks, leading to a “double workday.” Feminist movements in the 1990s had this unequal division of labor as one of their key demands. The need to generate income to support their families, combined with the burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, laid the



groundwork for the "care crisis" (UN WOMEN, 2021, p.14) which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For women in marginalized communities, labor market participation meant a "triple workday" since, in addition to employment and household responsibilities, many were actively involved in community organizations. Throughout the 1990s, they played a crucial role in sustaining life and survival strategies at both family and collective levels. These actions responded to the neoliberal policies adopted by most governments in the region, which deepened exclusion, unemployment, and job insecurity, disproportionately affecting lower-income populations.

Neoliberal policies and an economic model based on natural resource exploitation and export dependency on the Global North (Brown, C. et al, 2024, p. 22) negatively impacted rural and ethnic communities, particularly women in these communities. The deprivation of their lands and natural resources not only undermined their livelihoods but also invisibilized their worldviews and ancestral practices. In this context, feminist movements began incorporating the specific demands of diverse women—rural, Indigenous, Afro-descendants, and others—generating knowledge from their own perspectives and interests.

During this period, feminist movements also raised their voices against violence against women, especially its most extreme and brutal form: femicide (or feminicide). They demanded concrete resources and measures from States to eradicate it. In 1994, most OAS member states signed the Belém do Pará Convention, the first international treaty to recognize women's right to a life free from violence, establishing States' responsibilities for its prevention, punishment, and eradication.

## CURRENT CONTEXT: PROGRESS AND SETBACKS IN THE BEIJING AGENDA

Since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was approved, five evaluations have been conducted on its implementation: Beijing+5 (2000), Beijing+10 (2005), Beijing+15 (2010), Beijing+20 (2015), and Beijing+25 (2020), with the active participation of countries and feminist movements.

Due to the sustained efforts and organization of the feminist and women's movements, both regionally and globally, the Beijing Platform for Action agendas have been incorporated into the Sustainable Development Agenda, adopted by States in 2015 within the framework of the United Nations. In this context, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030 Agenda includes a specific goal on gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5), reflecting its importance on the global agenda.

Thirty years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it is essential to assess the 2020-2025 period. This analysis will help to build on attained advancements, , systematize achievements in



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different areas of action, identify new challenges, and simultaneously, examine the setbacks the region faces in the current context.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on women's rights and equal participation. According to OXFAM's Econonuestra's Report, the health crisis particularly affected Latin America and the Caribbean, exacerbating inequalities between the wealthiest and the poorest (Brown, C., 2024). Despite the efforts of various governments—such as implementing economic aid for low-income families, taxes on the "super-rich," and tax reductions for citizens—the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals and corporations was not reversed. Additionally, the prolonged suspension of economic activities to contain the virus caused a decline in GDP in all countries of the region, leading to a significant increase in poverty and further deepening inequality gaps. Government resources were insufficient, and women bore the greatest burden in sustaining life, both in their homes and communities. In the hardest-hit areas where the State was absent, women became key protagonists, organizing networks in neighborhoods and community spaces to face the crisis.

The exit from the COVID-19 crisis was largely possible thanks to women's efforts. During the lockdown, they took on most of the caregiving responsibilities in households, especially after the closure of educational systems, when they were forced to assume new roles in educational support and emotional containment for their children. All this occurred while they continued working under more flexible arrangements such as "home office" or in essential sectors like healthcare and social assistance, exposing themselves to infection on the pandemic's frontlines.

It is worth highlighting that, during the early decades of the 21st century, the region's countries—especially in the Southern Cone—experienced a new 'democratic spring', enabling significant progress in recognizing human rights, particularly concerning the rights of women, girls, and diverse populations. These advances were more evident in countries governed by progressive forces, known as the "pink tide" (BrownC. et al, 2024), although they were not exclusively limited to them. From 2010 onwards, feminist and LGBT movements achieved notable influence on public and governmental agendas, promoting regulatory changes that led to the conquest of fundamental rights, such as equal marriage, gender identity recognition, abortion legalization in different modalities, gender parity, and the eradication of gender-based violence. Public policies were also implemented to guarantee these rights. In this context, most states in the region, which already had Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women (MAW, in Spanish MAM), strengthened these institutions, expanding their mandates and functions to ensure greater effectiveness in implementing equality policies.

Paradoxically, since the early 2010s, we have witnessed the rise of anti-rights and anti-gender movements, forming coalitions and alliances that, although varying in each country, share common characteristics. These alliances include ultra conservative political and social groups, and fundamentalist sectors from various religious traditions in the region, mainly Catholic, Evangelical and, Neo-Pentecostal, supported by part of the most concentrated economic elite (ONU Mujeres, 2022, p.





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8-9) whose primary objective has been to reverse advances in human, social, feminist, and diversity rights in the region. They have gained power, securing parliamentary representation in various countries in the region. From there, they have deployed strategies to reverse human rights advancements, with a particular focus on restricting women's and LGBT rights (Correa, S. et al, 2022) through the construction of the concept of "gender ideology" as a tool for social and political mobilization.

A few years before the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these coalitions gained executive power through elections, in some cases with broad popular support. Once in government, they pushed measures to restrict civic space, limiting free association and violently repressing popular protests. Up to date, these actions resulted in significant setbacks in rights, particularly affecting access to sexual and reproductive rights and other key areas such as comprehensive sex education and gender parity.

In countries where these coalitions or alliances have gained power (Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, among others), Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women (MAM) have been downgraded, eliminated, merged, or drastically defunded. As a result, many of these institutions have been hollowed out, lacking the resources or effective leadership to implement public policies for equality. In some cases, they have even been used to redefine women's and girls' rights through conservative lens, promoting patriarchal family structures that reinforce historical inequalities and traditional gender roles (Correa, S. et al, 2022, p. 72).

Since then, the political context in most of the region's countries has become increasingly polarized, deepening a new version of the left-right dichotomy, where progressive and conservative political projects clash with no middle ground. This polarization has radicalized the political landscape, making conciliatory positions unfeasible and discouraging any third-way alternatives. In this climate of confrontation, political violence has increased, eroding democracies that, in many cases, were already fragile or unstable. Although democratic institutions are the foundation for recognizing and guaranteeing human rights—since there are no rights without democracy—over the past decade, these regimes have lost credibility among citizens. In some countries, this crisis of trust became deeper and more widespread, as evidenced by Latinobarómetro data (2023, p. 18 a 23).

While democratic disaffection affects all social sectors, recent experiences of the ultraconservative right-wing's rise in Latin America—and also in Europe—suggest that one particular social group has been a key target for these projects: young men. This sector plays a crucial role in shaping the social models promoted by these movements. In many cases, these are young people with no historical anchor in politics, seeking to forge their ideological identity within a "revolution". However this is a conservative revolution, one that incorporates misogynistic, homophobic, racist, xenophobic, and even supremacist elements. These discourses and narratives of hate have been spread and amplified regionally and globally, significantly impacting social media, where they have found legitimacy and expansion.





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In a region like Latin America and the Caribbean, marked by a tragic history of military coups, authoritarian governments, and the consequent loss of democracy and human rights, it is crucial to recognize the importance of preserving democratic institutions. Only through these institutions can citizens participate in shaping their destiny, access development opportunities, strengthen social progress, and exercise their right to define their own life projects in an environment of well-being and free from violence.

## CHALLENGES

Thirty years after the Declaration and the creation of the Beijing Platform for Action, progress in women's rights has been significant though uneven. The current landscape demands not only defending what has been achieved but also taking on new challenges in a constantly changing world. Democracy has played a crucial role in securing these rights, but today it faces the challenge of resisting those who seek to undermine it from within while also strengthening itself to achieve true equality.

Ensuring real equality requires transforming political and economic structures, placing well-being, equity, and shared responsibility at the center of the social contract. This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of our time: transitioning toward care societies that prioritize life and enable the construction of a fairer and more sustainable future.

We identify the following as key challenges in core areas of the Beijing Agenda:

**Education and Economy:** It is essential to continue promoting women's participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in higher education and to ensure their access to job opportunities in these strategic sectors for economic development. The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence and other technologies demands that women actively participate in decision-making regarding their development and application, preventing the perpetuation of gender biases.

**Comprehensive Care Systems and Economy:** The creation of comprehensive care systems (CIS) is a central demand of the feminist movement, as the current economic model renders these tasks invisible and overburdens women. Redistributing caregiving responsibilities among the State, the private sector, the community, and households is key to achieving a care economy with decent and well-paid jobs. This will enable more women to enter and remain in the labor force, access decision-making spaces, and close gender gaps.

**Eradicating Violence:** In a context of increasing widespread violence, it is urgent to strengthen protection mechanisms for women. This includes demanding that States implement effective services and devices to address and support women, ensuring access to justice, and official case registration. Additionally, Action Plans must be adopted to implement international commitments in fighting against violence against women.





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**Participation in Decision-Making Spaces:** It is crucial to continue promoting political and electoral measures that secure gender parity and power in decision-making instances in all areas of democratic development. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize and address the multiple forms of discrimination faced by rural, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, young, and disabled women, ensuring their inclusion in decision-making at all levels of government and the private sector.

**Rights of Girls and Adolescents:** States must take decisive steps toward eradicating the multiple forms of violence faced by girls and adolescents, including sexual violence, technology-facilitated violence, and forced pregnancies in childhood and adolescence. To achieve this, it is essential to guarantee access to information and the full exercise of their sexual and reproductive rights, which includes comprehensive sexual education and access to abortion services.

**Comprehensive Sexual Education:** Comprehensive sexual education (CSE) must be implemented at all levels of the education system to ensure children's and adolescent's right to receive information on sexual and reproductive health. This not only helps prevent sexual abuse, domestic violence, and forced pregnancies but also strengthens their autonomy and decision-making capacity regarding their bodies and life plans.

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