

Women Still Battling Gender Bigotry Worldwide

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- Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 24 (IPS) - Nearly 62 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaimed "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," a few of the world's discriminatory laws against women are being progressively repealed in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America.

India and Malaysia have nullified their respective criminal laws allowing marital rape, while Haiti has abrogated its law permitting the murder by a husband of his wife in specific cases of adultery. South Korea has changed its law designating the man as head of the family, while Colombia has voided its discriminatory law setting 14 years as the minimum age of marriage for boys and 12 years for girls. And Pakistan has removed the evidentiary requirement of four male Muslim witnesses to prove rape.

But still, there is a long way to go, as women worldwide continue to battle against gender bigotry, says Taina Bien-Aime, executive director of Equality Now, a New York-based international human rights organisation. In a report to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which will hold a two-week session beginning Monday, Equality Now says that several other countries, including Mexico, Lesotho, Kuwait, Turkey, Romania, Serbia, Peru, France and Switzerland, have either repealed or amended laws that were clearly discriminatory against women.

Bien-Aime said there has been "some progress" in removing state-sanctioned legal discrimination against women - acts that generate no cost to governments and require no budget.

"However, despite commitments to repeal all gender-based discriminatory laws, many remain in force, which deny women formal recourse to justice and prevents them from fully participating in society," Bien-Aime told IPS.

And unfortunately, she pointed out, significant setbacks have occurred as well, "as we saw last year in Afghanistan with the Shia Personal Status law which, among other discriminatory provisions, makes the husband the head of the household and gives him the right to restrict his

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wife's movements."

At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in China, 189 governments adopted the Beijing Platform for Action which, among other things, urged U.N. member states to abolish discriminatory legislation in their statute books.

The 45-member CSW, a U.N. body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women, will next week assess the successes and failures of the Platform for Action.

Dr. Rawwida Baksh, programme leader of the Women's Rights and Citizenship Programme at the Ottawa-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC), told IPS that this year's CSW session marks the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

She pointed out that the Beijing conference was the largest global gathering of its kind, in which over 40,000 women and men participated.

The 12 key themes within the Beijing Platform for Action have been part of the agendas of governments, civil society and other agencies in the 15 years since.

They include fundamental issues of women's and girls' poverty and human rights, their unequal access to education, health and political decision-making, and the daily violence they face, particularly in situations of war and armed conflict.

Since the Beijing conference, new issues have emerged on the world stage that are critical to women's rights and gender equality, including HIV/AIDS and other pandemics, climate change and food insecurity, and the current global economic crisis, said Baksh.

However, despite significant advances, the current global economic crisis has revealed stark evidence of the gender-differentiated impact of the crisis, and women's economic vulnerability, she pointed out.

"In the wake of the continuing fallout from the crisis, many voices are calling for a drastic shift in the economic reasoning, measures, and triggers that define economic policy at the national, regional and international levels," Baksh declared.

IDRC says it has a particular interest in women's political representation in national and local governance, in order for governments to become more accountable to women and for public policies and national budgets to respond to women's specific needs, in relation to childcare, water and sanitation, health, education and employment.

In addition, Baksh said, women need to be more equally represented in order to reflect the actual composition of societies and to ensure that their diverse and specific experiences are taken into account, including poor women, dalit women, indigenous women, women from ethnic minorities, young women, migrant women and disabled women.

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In 1995, she said, women made up a dismal 10.5 percent of the world's parliamentarians, and in the 15 years since Beijing, women still comprise less than 20 percent.

IDRC will use the opportunity of this year's CSW to launch a new global research initiative on democratic governance, women's rights and gender equality which will support Southern-based researchers to investigate women's political citizenship and how democratic governance systems respond to women's rights, needs and priorities.

Bien-Aime of Equality Now told IPS, "It is often said out loud that if drafted in 2010, the formidable blueprint that is the Beijing Platform for Action could probably not have been successfully negotiated today because of the growth of religious fundamentalism and the push to preserve harmful practices against women under the guise of so-called culture."

While this is a disturbing statement, the Platform for Action nevertheless remains a powerful mandate for governments, with increased pressure and collaboration with civil society, to exercise political will and uphold the rights of the majority of their citizens.

Also, the grassroots and global women's movements have played an unprecedented role in the past two decades in persuading governments that the only path toward economic development, eradication of poverty, environmental safety, fulfillment of human rights and peace is through the empowerment of women and the protection of their rights, she added.

"One of the most commanding results of the Beijing Platform for Action is that it gave a blueprint for civil society focusing on women's rights to put pressure on their respective governments to reach those goals and fully commit to the pledges they've made," Bien-Aime declared.