

GENDER JUSTICE

Women's Rights Are Human Rights

By Elizabeth Fisher and Linda Gray MacKay



**Unitarian Universalist
Service Committee**

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Why Gender Justice: Women's Rights Are Human Rights?

The title *Gender Justice: Women's Rights Are Human Rights* is derived from two sources:

First, point 14 in the Beijing Declaration produced at the Fourth World Conference on Women affirms that "women's rights are human rights."

Second, "A Pledge for Gender Justice" was drafted by a working group of nongovernmental organizations in preparation for the Women's Linkage Caucus at the Preparatory Committee meeting for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held March 15 - April 5, 1995. It was endorsed by organizations from around the world.

The pledge begins: The Fourth World Conference on Women comes at a time when women's leadership is urgently needed in the face of challenges to our collective survival. Over the past decade, women have demonstrated that gender is central to all contemporary and cross-cutting debates on global issues, such as development, human rights, democracy, population, peace and the environment. They have shown that the empowerment and equal participation of women in decision making are necessary to the advancement of solutions to the world's crises.

What will be important as we end the forum and the conference at the end of this week, is that it will be NGOs who will hold governments to the commitments that they make. It is important that the final Platform for Action that is adopted be distilled down into words that every woman, no matter where she lives, or how much education she has, can understand. I think we should want every woman, no matter where she is, to believe that there are women all over the world who care about her health, who want her children to be educated, who want her to have the dignity and respect that she deserves to have.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, First Lady of the United States
Speech to NGO Forum on Women
September 1995
Huairou, China

Preface: Beyond Beijing

Advancing Women's Rights

For people unfamiliar with the global women's movement, Beijing is a world class city just like Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi, Cairo and Vienna. But for women around the globe who have been ana-

lyzing obstacles to the advancement of women worldwide, these cities represent critical international women's conferences organized by the United Nations during the last 20 years. These gatherings produced documents that identified a wide range of problems affecting women, and offered strategies for remedying them.

A document issued by the United States State Department in July 1995, just prior to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in September 1995, states that:

In the United States, women make up too large a percentage of those in poverty and constitute too small a percentage of those in power. These inequities exact an unaccept-

able cost in human potential and in the well-being of individuals, families and communities. They warrant our attention and action.

Americans have a stake in how women live around the world. Improving the status and lives of girls and women is an important goal in its own right. It is also the key to building a safer, more secure and peaceful world.

Policies that improve the status of women enable communities to alleviate poverty, develop local economies, expand the number of educated and healthy citizens, sustain the environment and strengthen families. Educating girls and women is one of the best development decisions any country can make. Serious problems facing the world will never be solved until women are able to use their full potential on behalf of themselves, their families and their global and local communities.



Young Salvadoran women, like the one to the right, now consider options in addition to motherhood for the future.

Providing a Moral Force for Change

At the Beijing conference, delegates from more than 180 countries met to finalize the “Platform for Action,” a blueprint for women’s advancement around the world. The Platform for Action lists “12 Critical Areas of Concern” that provide normative guidance for governments that bear the primary responsibility for implementing its strategic objectives. Though it is not a binding treaty, this document represents a global consensus on the issues and commits each nation to goals, standards of behavior, and specific legal, regulatory and enforcement actions. It offers corresponding strategic objectives and actions to be taken by governments, the international community, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector for removing existing obstacles. Each section of a U.N. document is generally adopted by consensus among the delegates present. Each nation’s delegation receives instructions from its capital on whether to accept, accept with reservations, or reject the entire document.

Since the United Nations conferences do not produce legally binding documents, U.N. documents have only the moral force of consensus among the nations drafting them, and many U.N. conference goals are not achieved because of failure to implement them. To ensure that the Platform for Action achieves its potential, member governments were challenged to pledge specific commitments for implementation. The U.S. Department of State, on behalf of the United States of America, made eight commitments to the Platform for Action, which are outlined in this book. Because the most effective mechanisms for advancing the status of women are women’s nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the international, national, state and local levels, the State Department, before the Beijing conference, solicited input from U.S. nongovernmental organizations concerning priorities for U.S. commitments.

These NGOs often hold forums at approximately the same time that official U.N. conferences are held. The forum held in Huairou, China, was attended by more than 30,000 women, men and children from around the globe. Like other NGO forums held parallel to major U.N. conferences, this forum consisted of workshops, seminars, exhibits and briefings, and it drew international celebrities and public figures. NGOs financed their own events and participation.

Securing Justice for All People

An estimated 5,000 to 7,000 U.S. citizens made the trip to the NGO forum in China. I was lucky enough to be one of them. As I listened to workshop presenters, engaged in personal conversations with women from around the world, and studied carefully crafted displays, the women’s movement for global social change assumed a concrete authenticity for me that I had only imagined prior to taking

part in this international experience. I learned firsthand that there are women everywhere who are determined to secure justice for all people. These women know that there is ample proof that as conditions improve for women, the quality of life for everyone rises.

*Unitarian Universalist
women at a workshop
at the NGO forum in
Huairou, China.*



Many of the women who came to Beijing work in their home countries with nongovernmental organizations. They came anxious to meet other women at the NGO forum and at the official U.N. conference. Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, NGO participants have played an increasingly more visible and effective role at official U.N. conferences as well as at their own forums. As NGOs have attained status as observers, lobbyists, advisers and members of national delegations, their input has proved useful and often essential to U.N. decision making.

Gender Justice: Providing Understanding and Developing Strategies and Plans for Action

Gender Justice is a workshop series produced by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), an NGO committed to women's empowerment, which has made one of its primary commitments recognition and promotion of the fact that "women's rights are human rights." This slogan grew out of the U.N. World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 (explored in session one of this workshop series), which was an important turning point for the global women's movement.

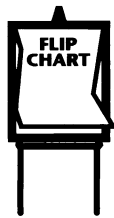
Providing a method for gaining a basic understanding of issues that are critical for women worldwide today, this workshop series supports efforts by women to:

- reduce violence against women
- control their personal health and reproductive capacities
- achieve economic independence and justice
- achieve equal access to education, mass media and communications
- actively contribute to environmental sustainability
- gain knowledge of their legal rights and ways to exercise them

Developing local actions that can be undertaken by groups of people who come together during these workshops is one of the key components of this series. During the workshops, ways to use the ideas contained in the Platform for Action and to strengthen and expand already existing efforts on behalf of women will be explored at the local, national and international levels.

Welcome to *Gender Justice: Women's Rights Are Human Rights!*

Elizabeth Fisher
June 1996



The Road to Beijing

1945	U.N. CHARTER
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1975	MEXICO CITY - First World Conference on Women
1979	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
1980	COPENHAGEN - Second World Conference on Women
1985	NAIROBI - Third World Conference on Women
1992	RIO - U.N. Conference on Environment & Development
1993	VIENNA - World Conference on Human Rights
1994	CAIRO - International Conference on Population and Development
1995	COPENHAGEN - World Summit for Social Development
1995	BEIJING - Fourth World Conference on Women

2. Continue discussing the following:

The role of the U.N. has been to provide a forum for **dialogue**, which has helped to produce hope, vision and new solutions to difficult problems. The **agreements** produced at U.N. conferences are adopted by consensus and represent agreed-upon **international standards**. These are used in many countries to **confront government officials** and **demand redress** of situations that do not conform to these standards.

The **First United Nations Conference on Women** was held in **Mexico City** in **1975**. In addition to the three other international women's conferences held, several world conferences on topics such as environment, human rights, population and social development all contributed to the articulation of internationally agreed upon positions on issues relating to women. The Beijing Conference produced the Platform for Action, which is central to this workshop series.

At the **Fourth World Conference on Women**, held in Beijing, China, the world had an opportunity to **review and appraise the advancement of women** since the U.N. held its Third Conference on Women (Nairobi, 1985).

The official U.N. conference included 4,000 delegates from 189 countries who adopted a **Platform for Action** that integrated **12 Critical Areas of Concern** into a vision that supports the concept that “women’s rights are human rights.”

Parallel to this conference the **Nongovernmental Organization Forum on Women** was held, which was attended by more than 30,000 representatives of nongovernmental organizations as well as individuals from around the globe. It took place in Huairou, a suburb of Beijing. The NGO forum consisted of a wide range of activities including: plenary sessions, workshops, art displays, dance presentations and demonstrations that explored concerns central to women. It was a **major networking event** for women from around the globe.

Those assembled for these events concluded that in the 20 years between the U.N. International Year of Women (1975) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in China (1995), **the situation of women worldwide has deteriorated significantly**. They also identified 12 Critical Areas of Concern developed through a review of progress since the Nairobi Conference (1985). These concerns are areas of particular urgency that stand out as **priorities for action**. Paragraph 45 of the section “Critical Areas of Concern” calls for action and resources on the strategic objectives relating to these critical areas of concern, which are interrelated, interdependent and of high priority. Paragraph 46 of the Platform for Action states:

“To this end, governments, the international community and civil society, including nongovernmental organizations and the private sector, are called upon to take strategic action in the following areas of concern.”

These 12 Critical Areas of Concern will form the **basis of our explorations** during this workshop series.

3. Read the description of each of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern and invite group members to alternately read the facts associated with them.

Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Beijing agreement will be a tool for education and mobilization on women’s rights for the coming decade.

Dick Scobie, executive director, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

12 Critical Areas of Concern

From the Platform for Action
Fourth World Conference on Women
Beijing, China, 1995

1. Poverty

Create social security systems wherever they do not exist. Develop gender sensitive national and international policies, including those related to structural adjustment. Provide poor women with economic opportunities and equal access to affordable housing, land, natural resources, credit and other services. Devise statistical means to recognize and make visible the work, including unpaid and domestic of women and their contribution to national economics.

2. Education

Close the gender gap in primary and secondary school education by the year 2005. Eradicate illiteracy of women worldwide by the year 2000 or another target date to be agreed at the conference. Improve women's access to and provide funding for vocational training, science and technology. Develop curricula, textbooks and teaching aids free of gender stereotypes.

3. Health

Strengthen and reorient health services in order to reduce maternal mortality by at least 50 percent of the 1990 levels by the year 2000. Strengthen preventive programmes that address threats to women's health. Make efforts to combat HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and recognize the impact of those diseases on women. Promote research on and increase funding for women's health issues and services.

4. Violence

Take integrated legal and social measures to prevent violence and protect women. Adopt measures to eliminate trafficking in women and eradicate violence against women who are vulnerable, such as those with disabilities and migrant workers. Study the causes of violence against women and effective measures of prevention.

5. Armed Conflicts

Increase and strengthen women's participation in conflict resolution. Promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace. Reduce the incidence of human rights abuses in conflicts situations, protect refugee and displaced women and provide assistance to women of the camps.

6. Economic Disparity

Enact laws to guarantee the rights of women and men to equal pay for equal work and adjust work patterns to promote the sharing of family responsibilities. Provide women with equal access to resources, employment markers and trade, as well as to information and technology. Eliminate sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination in the workplace.

7. Power Sharing

Ensure women's full and equal participation in power structures and decision making. Develop education and training to increase women's capacity to participate in decision making and leadership. Aim at gender balance in government bodies and the composition of delegations to the U.N.

8. Institutions

Ensure that responsibility for the advancement of women is invested at the highest level of government. Integrate gender perspectives in all legislation, public policies, programmes and projects. Collect and disseminate statistics showing gender impact of policies and programmes.

9. Human Rights

Encourage ratification of international human rights treaties and promote their implementation. Provide gender sensitive human rights training to public officials. Improve access to legal services and literacy through information campaigns and national training programmes.

10. Mass Media

Take steps to ensure women's access to information and the media on an equal basis. Encourage elimination of gender stereotyping in the media through studies, campaigns and various forms of self-regulation by media organizations.

11. Environment

Involve women in environmental decision making and integrate gender concerns in policies for sustainable development. Assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.

12. Girl Children

Eliminate all forms of discrimination, as well as negative cultural attitudes and practices, against girls. Ensure that girls develop a positive self-image and have equal access to education and health care. Protect girls from economic exploitation and eliminate violence against them.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR THREE HOUR SESSIONS

Mind Map: Violence Against Women

(45 minutes)

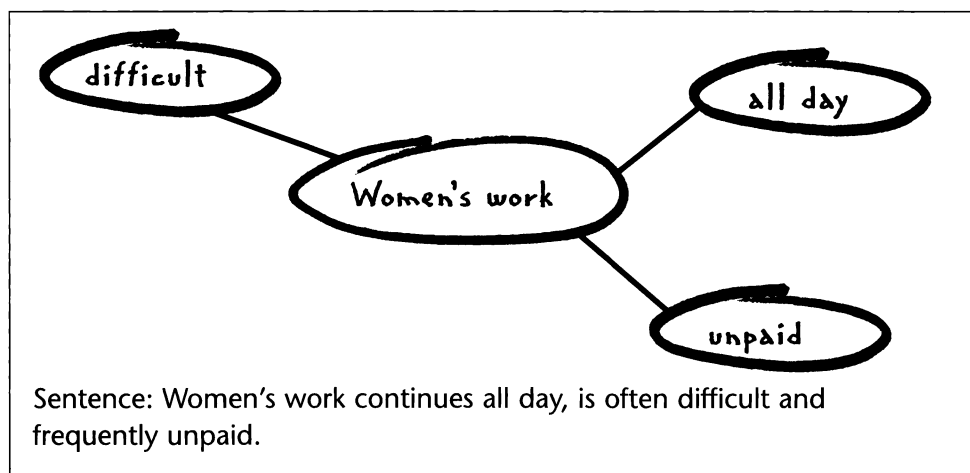
Objective

To explore feelings about violence against women.

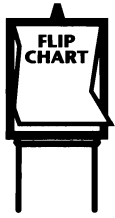
Process

1. Do a word association to the key phrase "violence against women." Write this key phrase in the middle of a piece of paper with a circle drawn around it. Jot down other words and phrases you associate with this central phrase in other circles on the page and connect them to lines drawn to the central circle containing the key phrase. (This exercise is an effective way to facilitate the focusing of diverse emotions.) See mind map directions below.
2. After everyone has had time to make several associations, ask them to write one sentence representing their matrix.
3. Invite participants to gather in groups of four and share their sentences.
4. Ask each group to come up with a combined statement that includes their individual understandings.
5. Depending on the size of the group, use about 10 minutes at the end of this segment to allow each group to share its statement with everyone.
6. Review flip chart list.

SIMPLE MIND MAP



Facilitator's Note: Prepare a flip chart in advance with the following information.



Causes of Violence Against Women:

Lower status accorded to women in the family and in society

Ignorance

Lack of laws to prohibit violence

Inadequate enforcement of existing laws

Absence of education that addresses its causes

Toleration and promotion of violence in society

Dehumanization and objectification of women

Facilitator's Note: Refer participants to the box entitled "Gender-Based Violence" in the background and resource section.

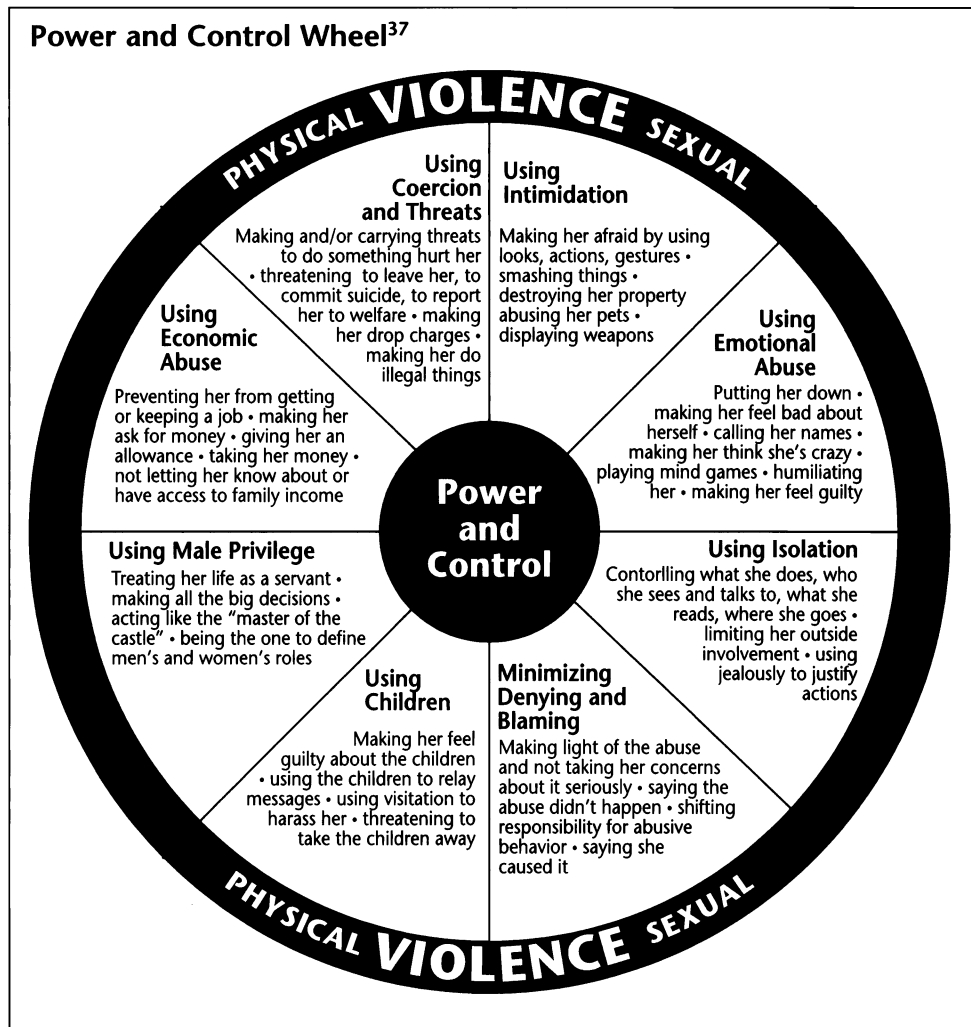
While the public hearings listen to the voices of the victims/survivors, they also listen to the voice of women who resist, who rebel, who dare to dream differently. They also attempt to challenge the dominant human rights discourse which is based on the legitimated discrimination of women.¹²

Asian Women's Human Rights Council

12 An Asian Women's Human Rights Council publication excerpt.

Discussions on Violence Against Women at Beijing³⁵

Vimochana, a Unitarian Universalist Service Committee overseas partner and a member of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council (AWHRC), organized a powerful, all day tribunal at the Beijing conference. The morning session was devoted to women who have experienced war, fundamentalist or ethnic violence and the globalization of the economy. The afternoon was devoted to presentations from women on how they have resisted these forces. The tribunal concluded with a call to create a new matrix for a more caring, compassionate and just society for all.³⁶



35 Smith Patterson, Dorothy, president of the UUSC Board of Directors, in a conference retreat from Oct. 1995.

36 Ibid.

37 "Power and Control Wheel." From a YWCA information packet, Sonoma, Calif.

About the Authors

ELIZABETH FISHER is a professional writer and editor who has been active in the women's movement for more than 25 years, and who attended the Fourth World Conference on Women NGO Forum in Huairou in 1995. A Unitarian Universalist for many years, she has a particular interest in women, religion and social justice, providing leadership in both areas at the local, regional and international levels. She is author of the curriculum *Rise Up and Call Her Name: A Woman-honoring Journey into Global, Earth-based Spiritualities*, published by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation.

LINDA GRAY MACKAY, who has been involved in social justice work for the last 30 years, has a deep commitment to women's rights. She has been a teacher, social worker and public administrator and has served on the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee since 1984. She also served as a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador in the late 1960s. Author of *A Journey to Understanding: A Central American Study Guide* and *The Busy Person's Guide to Social Action*, two highly acclaimed UUSC publications, she also produced and directed two UUSC videos: *Partners for Justice* and *El Salvador In Crisis*, which served as the centerpiece of UUSC's nationwide campaign, "End Our Forgotten War."