
Promoting global justice when backlash strikes: the Beijing consensus on gender equality ? and what happened to it

[The EU-blog](#)[1] - March 8, 2018 - 16:05

(Image: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka marching in New York on 8 March 2015. (Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown))

Proponents of gender equality experience an increasingly rough environment for progressive advocacy. When backlash strikes, the EU is one of the few remaining allies for international women's rights movements, writes GLOBUS researcher Cathrine Holst on the International Women's Day.

The legacy of the Beijing consensus on gender equality

The UN Beijing World Conference on Women in September 1995 was a landmark event. 17 000 participants and 30 000 activists took part, and the famous Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action that resulted, made substantive commitments in twelve critical areas. These included human rights for women, women and the economy, women and health, and women in power and decision-making.

Existing studies have established the European Union (EU) as a central agenda setter and progressive player at the Beijing 1995 conference. The resulting Declaration and Platform of Action has moreover had real significance. To be sure, gender equality in all dimensions of life is a highly unfinished agenda still, and some countries have made little progress in this area. Some have even moved backwards with devastating consequences for women and girls. Yet, the Beijing consensus facilitated a global spread of gender equality norms and the establishment of new gender machineries and legislation in many parts of the world, including at the EU-level and in member countries.

But what did the Beijing Declaration and Platform and the EU's norm entrepreneurship at the 1995 event imply from a global justice perspective? The GLOBUS project equips us with three global justice conceptions. Global justice as non-domination regards freedom of individuals as primarily protected within the state structure. International law and human rights are central to regulating global interaction, according to this conception. However, involvement in multilateral institutions must take place on a voluntary basis and states must recognize each other as equal and refrain from interfering in the affairs of other states.

Global justice as impartiality regards, on the other hand, the autonomy of individuals as a universal normative concern across political and cultural contexts. States have relative value depending on the extent to which they ensure and enhance individual rights. Interference in the internal affairs of states may thus be required when the freedoms of individuals are at stake. Accordingly, this global justice conception prescribes the establishment of effective legal instruments and supranational institutions beyond the state.

Finally, global justice as mutual recognition shifts the focus from blueprint solutions for all to mechanisms

that recognize difference. Actors are different; contexts are different; experiences are particular, and vary; and there exists a plurality of equally reasonable values and worldviews. In this situation, global justice requires that all perspectives are given due hearing. Only in this way can we know what justice properly means and requires, and develop solutions that are adequately sensitive and relevant in a variety of contexts and among differently equipped and situated actor groups.

The EU – a promoter of women’s rights?

EU has a well-known democratic deficit, and previous studies have highlighted the limited participatory credentials of the Union’s external affairs procedures. Among organizations and countries on the international scene, however, the EU is regarded as a promoter of women’s rights. We can add to this the conventional insight that gender equality is a low salience issue, and, presumably, the risks involved in interfering with low salience issues across borders are relatively modest, since states’ core interests and concerns are left untouched.

Against this background, one might expect the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action pushed forward by the EU to reflect a human rights oriented, top-down notion of global justice. Moreover, one might expect the EU to be relatively unaffected by considerations of state sovereignty in this area and pursuing a fixed end result and “right” answers rather than fostering inclusion and sensitivity to difference.

A close reading of the Declaration and the Platform persistently stated in the name of and addressing “we, the Governments”, is a reminder of the centrality of state sovereignty in international politics, and the considerable relevance of the idea of global justice as non-domination. Yet, a notion of global justice as impartiality does also prevail. The expected impartiality approach is visible in passages that stress how individuals are the primary normative units, but also in sections that promote ambitious conceptions of individual autonomy and substantive ideas of gender equality. Moreover, the role of international bodies and binding legal mechanisms is emphasized.

Importantly, the conception of global justice as mutual recognition is relevant too, and more central than expected. The non-trivial participatory features of the proceedings at the 1995 event is one clear indicator of recognising difference. In addition, a textual analysis of the Declaration and Platform of Action also reveals a noteworthy and consistent concern for context and pluralism, and of how gender equality must be defined and developed bottom-up.

The return of state sovereignty

However, more than twenty years have passed, and a UN Beijing +20 conference was organized in New York in 2015. The conference’s final statement and other publicly available documents, media reports, as well as interviews with civil society representatives and gender experts put on display how the conception of global justice as impartiality has become more marginal in the global politics of gender equality.

The meagre, stripped-down statement from the New York conference is a reflection of this. Media coverage and interviews also confirm the picture of an event and a process where powerful international players were more concerned with restricting and narrowing down the women’s rights agenda and emphasizing the prerogative of states to manage gender, sexuality and equality issues as internal issues, than with enhancing the Beijing consensus and ambitions from 1995. Moreover, civil society participation was severely limited during the proceedings. This stands in sharp contrast to the inclusive mode that facilitated the Beijing success twenty years earlier, and in conflict, clearly, with a conception of global justice as mutual recognition.

Yet, even if the EU contributed actively in the Beijing +20 process, there is little evidence that the Union pushed for these setbacks. At least publicly exposed statements about EU positions indicate a consistent commitment to pursuing and developing the Beijing path in the future. Furthermore, women’s movement’s

representatives and gender experts mention the EU, and some countries, such as Sweden, Norway etc., among the few remaining allies in a global landscape where proponents of gender equality experience an increasingly rough and less friendly environment for progressive advocacy.

The shift in the relative importance of different global justice conceptions on the international gender equality scene from 1995 to 2015 likely reflects changes in global power politics. China is on the rise, EU-Russia conflicts have intensified, and alliances among both Catholic countries and conservative Christians, and Muslim countries show persistence. The prospects of achieving a global agreement on demanding gender equality requirements and policies certainly have not improved after Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election.

We are, it seems, also in a situation where it has become harder to separate low and high salience, and where gender policy is no longer a soft and marginal issue, but increasingly "big politics". This may make it harder for the EU and other actors to push the gender equality agenda beyond global justice as non-domination – if, indeed, this is what they are aiming at. Unfortunately, the latter years' economic stagnation and austerity policies, in combination with a rising support for populist and conservative parties across Europe, has pushed gender equality further down on the agenda in several EU countries, as well as in EU-level institutions. Over time, we should not be surprised if this also affects the EU's external agenda.

Read more:

Cathrine Holst (forthcoming). Promoting global justice when backlash strikes: EU and UN Beijing +20. GLOBUS Research Paper.

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This blog was written as part of the research project GLOBUS Reconsidering European Contributions to Global Justice (funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme) and first published at the Global Justice Blog www.globus.uio.no[2].

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