UNIT: 3 PLATFORMS FOR ACTION

**Structure**

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Objectives

3.3 First World Conference on Women (1975): Mexico
   - 3.3.1 Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace, 1975
   - 3.3.2 Plans of Action

3.4 Second World Conference on Women (1980): Copenhagen

3.5 Third World Conference on Women (1985): Nairobi


3.7 (Beijing + 5) Five-year Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 2000

3.8 (Beijing + 10) Ten-year Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 2005

3.9 (Beijing + 15) Global 15-year Review Process in the 54th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2009

3.10 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

3.11 Summing Up

3.12 Glossary

3.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

3.14 References

3.15 Questions for Reflection and Practice

**3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In June 1946, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality, and to provide recommendations to the Council on the obstacles relating women’s rights in political, economic, civil, social and education fields. Over the years, the CSW has
organized different conferences in order to assert and improve the rights of women. The conferences have sought to unite the international community behind a set of common objectives with an effective plan of action for the advancement of women everywhere, in all spheres of public and private life. They have provided platform for action for addressing gender issues and paved way for development. Those actions are discussed in this Unit.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, You should be able to:

- Explain the actions taken for gender and development over a period of time;
- Examine the measures taken for women’s empowerment at the international level; and
- Analyze the consequences of platforms for action.

3.3 FIRST WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN (1975): MEXICO

The first world conference on the status of women was convened in Mexico City to coincide with the 1975 International Women's Year, observed to remind the international community that discrimination against women continued to be a persistent problem in much of the world. The Conference, along with the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985) proclaimed by the General Assembly launched a new era in global efforts to promote the advancement of women by opening a worldwide dialogue on gender equality. A process was set in motion—a process of learning—that would involve deliberation, negotiation, setting objectives, identifying obstacles and reviewing the progress made.

The Mexico City Conference was called for by the United Nations General Assembly to focus international attention on the need to develop future oriented goals, effective strategies and plans of action for the advancement of women. To this end, the General Assembly identified three key objectives that would become the basis for the work of the United Nations on behalf of women:

- Full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination;
- The integration and full participation of women in development;
- An increased contribution by women in the strengthening of world peace.
The Conference responded by adopting a World Plan of Action, a document that offered guidelines for governments and the international community to follow for the next ten years in pursuit of the three key objectives set by the General Assembly. The Plan of Action set minimum targets, to be met by 1980, that focused on securing equal access for women to resources such as education, employment opportunities, political participation, health services, housing, nutrition and family planning.

This approach marked a change, which had started to take shape in the early 1970s, in the way that women were perceived. Whereas previously women had been seen as passive recipients of support and assistance, they were now viewed as full and equal partners with men, with equal rights to resources and opportunities. A similar transformation was taking place in the approach to development, with a shift from an earlier belief that development served to advance women, to a new consensus that development was not possible without the full participation of women.

The Conference called upon governments to formulate national strategies and identify targets and priorities in their effort to promote the equal participation of women. By the end of the United Nations Decade for Women, 127 Member States had responded by establishing some form of national machinery, institutions dealing with the promotion of policy, research and programmes aimed at women's advancement and participation in development.

Within the United Nations system, in addition to the already existing Branch (now Division) for the Advancement of Women, the Mexico City Conference led to the establishment of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to provide the institutional framework for research, training and operational activities in the area of women and development.

An important facet of the meeting in Mexico City was that women themselves played an instrumental role in shaping the discussion. Of the 133 Member State delegations gathered there, 113 were headed by women. Women also organized a parallel NGO Forum, the International Women's Year Tribune, which attracted approximately 4,000 participants.

Sharp differences emerged among the women gathered at the Forum, reflecting the political and economic realities of the times. Women from the countries of the Eastern Block, for instance, were most interested in issues of peace, while women from the West emphasized equality and those from the developing world placed priority on development. Nevertheless, the Forum
played an important role in bringing together women and men from different cultures and backgrounds to share information and opinions and to set in motion a process that would help unite the women's movement, which by the end of the Decade for Women would become truly international. The Forum was also instrumental in opening up the United Nations to NGOs, who provided access for the voices of women to the Organization's policy-making process.

3.3.1 Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace, 1975

Recognizing that women of the entire world, whatever differences exist between them, share the painful experience of receiving or having received unequal treatment, and that as their awareness of this phenomenon increases they will become natural allies in the struggle against any form of oppression, such as is practiced under colonialism, neo-colonialism, zionism, racial discrimination and apartheid, thereby constituting an enormous revolutionary potential for economic and social change in the world today.

Recognizing also the urgency of improving the status of women and finding more effective methods and strategies which will enable them to have the same opportunities as men to participate actively in the development of their countries and to contribute to the attainment of world peace.

Convinced that women must play an important role in the promotion, achievement and maintenance of international peace, and that it is necessary to encourage their efforts towards peace, through their full participation in the national and international organizations that exist for this purpose, women have a vital role to play in the promotion of peace in all spheres of life: in the family, the community, the nations and the world. As such, women must participate equally with men in the decision-making processes which help to promote peace at all levels.

Women as well as men should promote real, general and complete disarmament under effective international control, starting with nuclear disarmament. Until genuine disarmament is achieved, women and men throughout the world must maintain their vigilance and do their utmost to achieve and maintain international peace.

3.3.2 Plans of Action

An essential condition for the maintenance and strengthening of international co-operation and peace is the promotion and protection of human rights for all in conditions of equity among and within nations. In order to involve more women in the promotion of international co-operation,
the development of friendly relations among nations, the strengthening of international peace and
disarmaments the peace efforts of women as individuals and in groups, and in national and
international organizations should be recognized and encouraged.
Women should have equal opportunity with men to represent their countries in all international
forums where the above questions are discussed, and in particular at meetings of the organization
of the United Nations system, including the Security Council and all conferences on
disarmament and international peace, and other regional bodies.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1:

Note: a) Use the space given below to answer the questions.
   b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the significance of world plan of action?
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3.4 SECOND WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN (1980): COPENHAGEN

There was a general consensus that significant progress had been made as representatives of 145
Member States met in Copenhagen in 1980 for the second world conference on women to review
and appraise the 1975 World Plan of Action. Governments and the international community had
made strides toward achieving the targets set out in Mexico City five years earlier.
An important milestone had been the adoption by the General Assembly in December 1979 of
the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, one of the
most powerful instruments for women's equality. The Convention, which has been termed "the
bill of rights for women", now legally binds 165 States, which have become States parties and
obligates them to report within one year of ratification, and subsequently every four years, on the
steps they have taken to remove obstacles they face in implementing the Convention. An
Optional Protocol to the Convention, enabling women victims of sex discrimination to submit
complaints to an international treaty body, was opened for signature on Human Rights Day, 10
December 1999. Upon its entry into force, it will put the Convention on an equal footing with other international human rights instruments having individual complaints procedures.

Despite the progress made, the Copenhagen Conference recognized that signs of disparity were beginning to emerge between rights secured and women's ability to exercise these rights. To address this concern, the Conference pinpointed three areas where specific, highly focused action was essential if the broad goals of equality, development and peace, identified by the Mexico City Conference, were to be reached. These three areas were equal access to education, employment opportunities and adequate health care services.

The deliberations at the Copenhagen Conference took place in the shadow of political tensions, some of them carried over from the Mexico City Conference. Nevertheless, the Conference came to a close with the adoption of a Programme of Action, albeit not by consensus, which cited a variety of factors for the discrepancy between legal rights and women's ability to exercise these rights including:

- Lack of sufficient involvement of men in improving women's role in society;
- Insufficient political will;
- Lack of recognition of the value of women's contributions to society;
- Lack of attention to the particular needs of women in planning;
- A shortage of women in decision-making positions;
- Insufficient services to support the role of women in national life, such as co-operatives, day-care centres and credit facilities;
- Overall lack of necessary financial resources;
- Lack of awareness among women about the opportunities available to them.

The Copenhagen Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality. Delegates at the Conference also urged an end to stereotyped attitudes towards women. States should help women to participate in promoting international cooperation for the sake of the preparation of societies for a life in peace. Solidarity campaigns with women struggling against colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, racial discrimination and apartheid and for national independence and liberation should be intensified; such women should receive all possible assistance, including support from agencies of the United Nations system as well as other organizations.
3.5 THIRD WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN (1985): NAIROBI

The UN's Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi represented the culmination of ten years of work on gender empowerment. Attended by approximately 1,400 official delegates from 157 countries and 15,000 NGO representatives, the conference aimed to evaluate the progress made during UN Decade for Women and devise a new course of action for the advancement of women. While substantial progress had been made in the last ten years, it was clear that there was still a great deal to be done. Participants were especially vocal on the subject of violence against women, which they felt had not been given the attention it deserved. At the same time, many others believed that the conference needed to focus on finding ways to strengthen the role of women in Peace and Development initiatives. At the Nairobi conference, participants set their differences aside and awarded equal consideration to these interrelated and mutually reinforcing goals.

3.5.1 The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies

The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies adopted by the conference, provides a blueprint for action until 2000 that link the promotion and maintenance of peace to the eradication of violence against women throughout the broad spectrum of society. The document urges member states to take constitutional and legal steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and tailor national strategies to facilitate the participation of women in efforts to promote peace and development. At the same time, it contains specific recommendations for gender empowerment in regard to health, education and employment.

The greatest achievement of the Nairobi conference is that, despite the acute differences dividing the 157 member states, representatives were able to find a common ground on all the issues addressed and unanimously adopt the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies.

The Nairobi conference revealed that women movements had grown in number and scope, and that they represented an international force for equality, peace and development. After Nairobi, women's movements began to emerge more frequently on the global scene. At the September 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (ICPD), for instance, women's movements pushed for the recognition of women's health, education and rights as prerequisites for effective policies in population and development. In addition, many important recommendations for the advancement of women were made in the conference's Programme of
Action. These recommended actions included the establishment of mechanisms for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life, as well as the formulation of laws, programmes and policies to enable employees of both sexes to harmonize their family and work responsibilities.

The storm initiated at Nairobi on the subject of violence against women did not dry out. The issue received further credence in June 1993 at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

Finally, on December 20th 1993, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Thus, the Nairobi Conference was mandated to seek new ways of overcoming obstacles for achieving the objectives of the Decade: equality, development and peace. Three basic categories were established to measure the progress achieved: constitutional and legal measures; equality in social participation; equality in political participation and decision-making. The Nairobi Conference recognized that gender equality was not an isolated issue, but encompassed all areas of human activity. It was necessary for women to participate in all spheres, not only in those relating to gender.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2:

Note: a) Use the space given below to answer the questions.

   b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the main deliberation of Nairobi Conference?

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3.6 BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION (1995)

While the efforts of the previous two decades, starting with the Mexico City Conference in 1975, had helped to improve women's conditions and access to resources, they had not been able to change the basic structure of inequality in the relationship between men and women. Ways had
to be sought to empower women so that they could bring their own priorities and values as equal partners with men in decision-making processes at all levels.

Recognition of the need to involve women in decision-making had begun to emerge during the course of the series of global conferences held by the United Nations in the early 1990s on various aspects of development including the environment, human rights, population and social development. All the conferences had stressed the importance of women's full participation in decision-making, and women's perspectives were incorporated into the deliberations and the documents that were adopted.

However, it was with the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, that a new chapter in the struggle for gender equality can truly be said to have begun. The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, had to be re-evaluated. Only by such a fundamental restructuring of society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all aspects of life. This change represented a strong reaffirmation that women's rights were human rights and that gender equality was an issue of universal concern, benefiting all.

The Conference unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, that was in essence an agenda for women's empowerment and stands as a milestone for the advancement of women in the twenty-first century. The formulation of the Platform for Action is aimed at establishing a basic group of priority actions that should be carried out during the next five years. The Platform for Action specified twelve critical areas of concern considered to represent the main obstacles to women's advancement and which required concrete action by Governments and civil society:

- The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
- Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training
- Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services
- Violence against women
The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation

Inequality in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources

Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels,

Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women

Stereotyping of women

Inequality in women’s access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media

Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment

Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

By adopting the Beijing Platform for Action, governments committed themselves to the effective inclusion of a gender dimension throughout all their institutions, policies, planning and decision-making. What this in effect meant was that before decisions were to be made or plans to be implemented, an analysis should always be made of the effects on, and needs of, both women and men. The introduction of gender mainstreaming called for the re-examination of society in its entirety and its basic structure of inequality. The focus was, therefore, no longer limited to women and their status in society but was committed to restructuring institutions and political and economic decision-making in society as a whole.

In endorsing the Platform for Action, the United Nations General Assembly called upon all States, the UN system and other international organizations, as well as NGOs and the private sector to take action to implement its recommendations. Within Member States, national machineries that had been established to promote the status of women were assigned a new function as the central policy-coordinating unit to mainstream a gender perspective throughout all institutions and programmes. Within the United Nations system, the Secretary-General designated a senior official to serve as his Special Adviser on Gender Issues, whose role was to
ensure system-wide implementation of the gender perspective in all aspects of the work of the United Nations. The Organization was also assigned a key role in the monitoring of the Platform.

The Beijing Conference was considered a great success, both in terms of its size and its outcome. It was the largest gathering of government and NGO representatives ever held, with 17,000 in attendance, including representatives of 189 governments. The presence and influence of NGOs, one of the most active forces in the drive for gender equality, had increased dramatically since the Mexico City Conference in 1975. In Beijing, NGOs had directly influenced the content of the Platform for Action and they would play an important role in holding their national leaders accountable for the commitments they had made to implement the Platform.

3.7 (BEIJING + 5) FIVE-YEAR REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION, 2000

The twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century" took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 5 June to 9 June 2000 and adopted a Political Declaration and outcome document entitled "further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action". This briefing note summarizes the steps leading up to the special session and immediate implications of its outcome for the work of the Commission on the Status on Women, one of the main functional commissions of ECOSOC and the main intergovernmental body tasked with the responsibility of promoting the advancement of women and gender equality.

3.8 (BEIJING + 10) TEN-YEAR REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION, 2005

In the Political Declaration adopted in by the United Nations General Assembly at its twenty-third special session in June 2000, Member States agreed to "assess regularly further implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action with a view to bringing together all parties involved in 2005 to assess progress and consider new initiatives, as appropriate, ten years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action".
A review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), was mandated in the multi-year programme of work of the Commission on the Status of Women for its forty-ninth session in March 2005. The Commission considered two themes:

- "Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly"; and
- "Current challenges and forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls"

The review and appraisal by the Commission focused on implementation at national level and identify achievements, gaps and challenges and provided an indication of areas where actions and initiatives, within the framework of the Platform for Action and the outcome of the special session (Beijing+5), are most urgent to further implementation.

### 3.9 (BEIJING + 15) GLOBAL 15-YEAR REVIEW PROCESS IN THE 54TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN, 2009

At its fifty-third session in 2009, the Commission on the Status of Women decided to review the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), at its fifty-fourth session in 2010, emphasizing the sharing of experiences and good practices, with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges, including those related to the Millennium Development Goals.

In its programme of work for the period 2010-2014, the Commission decided that the review of implementation would also assess its contribution towards the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals. The Commission focused on two thematic issues as outlined in its thematic programme of work for the period 2010 to 2014.

- Review of the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, with an emphasis on the sharing of experiences
and good practices with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges; and

- Review of its contribution to shaping a gender perspective towards the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals.

At its fifty-third session in 2009, the Commission decided that the review would emphasize the sharing of experiences and good practices, with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges, including those related to the Millennium Development Goals.

### 3.10 CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations by its resolution almost 30 years ago on 18 December 1979. The Convention entered into force on 3 September 1981 as the first global and comprehensive legally binding international treaty aimed at the elimination of all forms of sex- and gender-based discrimination against women. As of December 2008, it had been accepted by 185 State parties. Although preceded by a number of general human rights treaties explicitly providing that the rights they establish shall be available to women and men on an equal basis, as well as those which address particular forms of discrimination against women, the rationale for the Convention is clearly stated in its Preamble which indicates “despite these various instruments extensive discrimination against women continues to exist”.

The Convention’s aim is the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women both de jure and de facto, resulting from the activities or omissions on the part of States parties, their agents, and committed by any persons or organizations in all fields of life, including in the areas of politics, economy, society, culture, civil and family life. Its goal is the recognition and achievement of the de jure and de facto equality of women and men, which is to be achieved by a policy of elimination of all forms of discrimination against women incorporating all appropriate legislative and programmatic measures. A primary requirement for States parties is to “embody the principle of equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation” and “to ensure... the practical realization of this principle” (article 2 (a)). This
requirement of practical realization of equality makes clear that the Convention envisages substantive equality between women and men in the enjoyment of all human rights.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 3:**

**Note:** a) Use the space given below to answer the questions.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the role of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2009?

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**3.11 SUMMING UP**

International conferences for women have provided platform for action to address gender issues and to bring gender equity and equality. The paradigm shift from welfare approach to gender mainstreaming approach has happened over a period of time through these conferences, conventions and deliberations. Their deliberations have made national governments to initiate proactive action for women through its policies and programmes. This Unit has explained these aspects in detail.

**3.12 GLOSSARY**

**INSTRAW:** Since 1979, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) has been the leading UN Institute devoted to research, capacity-development and knowledge management with the goal of achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment.

**UNIFEM:** The United Nations Development Fund for Women, commonly known as UNIFEM was established in December 1976 originally as the Voluntary Fund for the United
Nations Decade for Women in the International Women's Year. But in the year 2010 UN-\nINSTRAW and UNIFEM along with DAW (Division for the Advancement of Women) and \nOSAGI (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women) are \nmerged to form UN Women.

3.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1:

1) World plan of action offers guideline to follow:
   - Full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination;
   - The integration and full participation of women in development;
   - An increased contribution by women in the strengthening of world peace.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2:

1) Nairobi Conference provided a blueprint for action until 2000 that link the promotion and \nmaintenance of peace to the eradication of violence against women throughout the broad spectrum of society. The document urges member states to take constitutional and legal steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and tailor national strategies to facilitate the participation of women in efforts to promote peace and development.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3:

1) The role of the commission is to:
   - Review the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcomes of the 23rd special session of the General Assembly, with an emphasis on the sharing of experiences and good practices with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges; and
   - Review its contribution to shaping a gender perspective towards the full realization of the Millennium Development Goals.

3.14 REFERENCES


3.15 QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

1. Explain the plans of action taken at the first conference for women in Mexico.
2. What are drawbacks of Nairobi Conference?