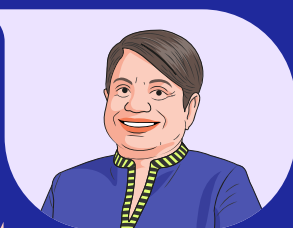
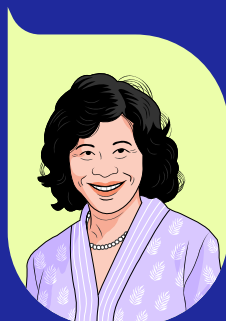


GWL Voices at Beijing 1995



Stories of
Leadership,
Legacy,
and Change



Introduction

Beijing's Women Enduring Legacy

In 1995, thousands of women from around the world gathered in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women—a defining moment that boldly affirmed that women's rights are human rights. It marked a collective commitment to placing gender equality at the heart of peace, development, and justice, forging a powerful link between global priorities and gender equality commitments.

Among those who helped shape the landmark **Beijing Platform for Action** were women who would go on to become global leaders—ministers, diplomats, heads of UN agencies, and presidents. Many of them are now part of **GWL Voices**, carrying forward the momentum of Beijing while recognizing how far we still must go.

As we approach **Beijing+30**, this publication honors their memories, celebrates the gains, and confronts the gaps that persist. With a blend of personal testimony and political insight, GWL Voices members reflect on the power of that historic moment—and why its promises must be fulfilled now more than ever.



Because thirty years later, the world is still waiting for what was pledged in Beijing: not only equality in law, but equality in power.



To the courageous members of GWL Voices who stood strong at the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995, we honor your unwavering dedication and fearless leadership that helped ignite a global movement for gender equality. Your voices broke barriers, challenged norms, and laid the foundation for progress that continues to this day. Decades later, your commitment has not wavered—your work has only deepened and expanded, carrying forward the spirit of Beijing with relentless passion and vision. You inspire new generations to carry the torch with the same fierce resolve, proving that the struggle for justice, rights, and equality is a lifelong journey—and one that you embrace with heart, courage, and unbreakable hope.

To all of you, thank you for continuously leading change and driving leadership.

Author: Andrea Ortega Carreño.
Illustration and Design: www.souvenirme.com

GWL Voices

The Groundbreakers Members at Beijing

The legacy of the Beijing Conference lives not only in documents and declarations, but in the lived experiences of the women who shaped it. Among them are several members of GWL Voices—leaders who were present in 1995 as negotiators, advocates, ministers, or representatives.

They carried the hopes of a generation into the halls of the Fourth World Conference on Women, and they left with a shared vision for change. Three decades later, they continue to lead and inspire, bringing the spirit of Beijing into today's multilateral debates.

Their testimonies remind us that progress is never inevitable—it is built by those who show up, speak out, and stay the course.



GWL Voices:

The Groundbreakers Members at Beijing

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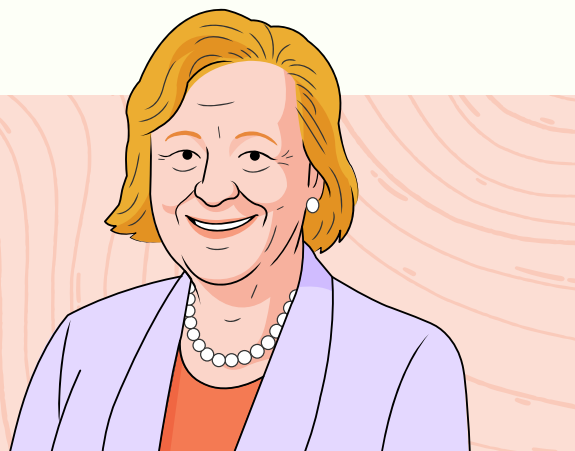
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JAN BEAGLE

Orchestrating Change in the Making of Beijing



Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General of the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), was responsible for coordinating preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 within the Executive Office of the Secretary-General. All international conferences are complex. but as the Beijing Conference and the Huairou NGO Forum were the first large-scale international events of their kind to be hosted by China, there were multiple substantive, logistic and diplomatic issues to resolve.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: Behind the Scenes, Ahead of the Curve

Jan worked directly with the Secretary-General's Special Adviser, Ambassador Ismat Kittani, who led the sensitive diplomatic negotiations with the Chinese government. They travelled several times to Beijing and concluded the intense negotiations around the NGO Forum just in time to **welcome an unprecedented number of civil society representatives who made a major contribution to the success of the conference.**

"The Beijing moment was possible because it was a time when the international community was able to reach consensus around the importance of women's rights and gender equality in driving change. 189 governments endorsed the Declaration and the Platform for Action. A key factor was that social change movements, especially the women's movement, were strong and governments from North and South were in listening mode and willing to commit to what were visionary documents [...] **Sadly in today's polarised world, with multiple crises and conflicts, it is difficult to imagine that this consensus would be possible,"** reflects.

>> Her Voice Today: Partnerships, Progress, and the Path Ahead

Thirty years on, Jan reflects on the legacy of Beijing and its lasting impact.

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"My main takeaway is the importance of the broadest possible partnerships, among governments, civil society, private sector, etc..."



...as well as the crucial role of the UN in providing diplomatic leadership to find common ground and expedite agreement," she says.

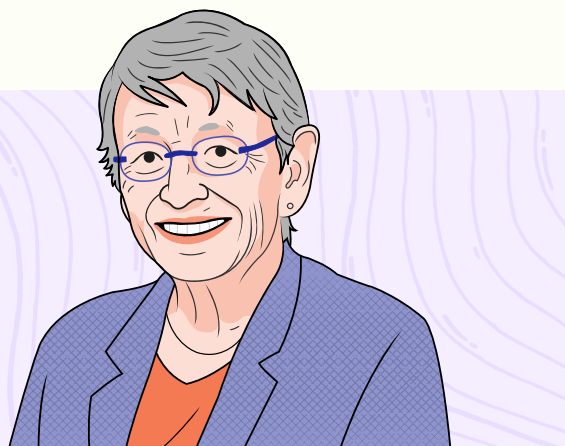
When turning to today's most urgent challenges, Jan is clear-eyed: "Progress has been slow and uneven. At this year's HLPF I moderated the session on SDG 5 and **it was clear that accelerated action is needed on SDG 5 as an enabler of the whole 2030 Agenda. Key issues include increasing leadership of women in political, economic and judicial spheres;** eliminating discriminatory laws and policies; expanding participation of women and girls in technology; closing the financing gaps; and improving data for evidence-based decision making. And again the importance of partnerships and the whole of society approaches." **Her call is not only a reflection, it is a roadmap for the urgent action still required.**



Read the full interview
at [GWL Voices.org](https://www.gwl.org/voices)

CAROL BELLAMY

A Champion for Children and Global Education



Ms. Carol Bellamy served as Executive Director of UNICEF from 1995 to 2005, **becoming the first former elected official and first woman to lead the organization.** Prior to joining UNICEF, she was Director of the Peace Corps and held public office in New York, including as President of the New York City Council. Carol brought a strong background in governance, public policy, and advocacy to UNICEF, where she led global efforts to promote child rights, education, and gender equality. **Her leadership emphasized results-driven programming and cross-sector partnerships, and she was a prominent voice in inter-agency cooperation within the UN system during a decade marked by growing attention to development and humanitarian challenges.**

>> Her Voice in Beijing: When Education Became a Lifeline

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing—her first major international event as UNICEF Executive Director—Carol delivered a compelling speech spotlighting the deep-rooted discrimination girls face globally. She highlighted the brutal cost of gender inequality, from missing millions of girls due to sex-selective practices to the systemic denial of education. **Calling education a girl's "lifeline to development," Bellamy framed schooling not as charity, but as a right and an engine of progress.** She called for global investment and action across governments, families, and international agencies, and **insisted that achieving equality in education was both possible and urgent.**



Read the full interview
at [GWL Voices.org](https://www.gwlvoices.org)

Her clear, forceful message still resonates:

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“We all agree that this is so. Let us now move to make it happen.”



>> Her Voice Today: Progress Won, Battles Unfinished

Thirty years after she stood on the stage in Beijing calling education a girl's “lifeline to development,” Carol reflects on how far the world has come—and how far it still needs to go. She notes that...

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“over the past 30 years there have been substantial advances in girls' education,”



...with gender parity in primary enrollment now reached in nearly all regions and women making up more than half of university students worldwide. Reforms like eliminating school fees, expanding rural schools, and improving sanitation have kept more girls in the classroom, while declines in early marriage have allowed many to continue their studies.

Yet, as Carol puts it, “despite the progress, significant challenges remain.” Girls in conflict zones are still 2.5 times more likely to be out of school, and those from rural, marginalized, or low-income communities—along with girls with disabilities—face the steepest hurdles. She warns that “enrollment does not guarantee learning,” pointing to persistent violence, entrenched gender norms, and a widening digital divide. Her message today echoes the urgency of her words in 1995: **the right to education must move from principle to practice for every girl, everywhere.**

CATHERINE BERTINI

A Global Leader for Food
Justice and Gender Equality



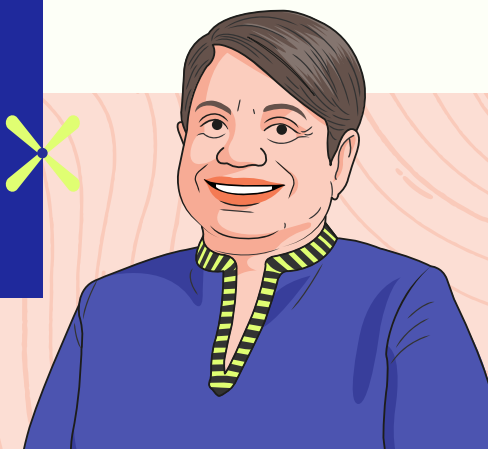
In 1995, Catherine Bertini was Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), becoming **the first woman to lead the world's largest humanitarian agency**. With a career spanning senior roles in the United Nations and U.S. government, she transformed WFP into a more effective, gender-responsive organization. **Under her leadership, WFP became a pioneer in linking hunger, gender inequality, and development.** Her groundbreaking work earned her global recognition, including the 2003 World Food Prize for advancing food security and empowering women through innovative programming.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: Bold, Urgent, and Unapologetically Focused on Women

At the Beijing Conference, Catherine delivered a powerful message: **"Women eat last."** She exposed the injustices women endure and challenged the global community to move beyond reports toward measurable, structural change. Furthermore, Catherine used her platform to **announce WFP's commitments: allocating 60% of food aid to women and girls in development programs, prioritizing girls' education, addressing women's nutritional deficiencies, and ensuring women manage and distribute food aid.** Perhaps most boldly, she defended food as leverage to shift social norms: **"Yes, it's bribery... but we are changing behaviour, we are giving hope."** Her words remain an example of leadership rooted in pragmatism, justice, and urgency.

RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY

A Global Voice
in Women's Rights



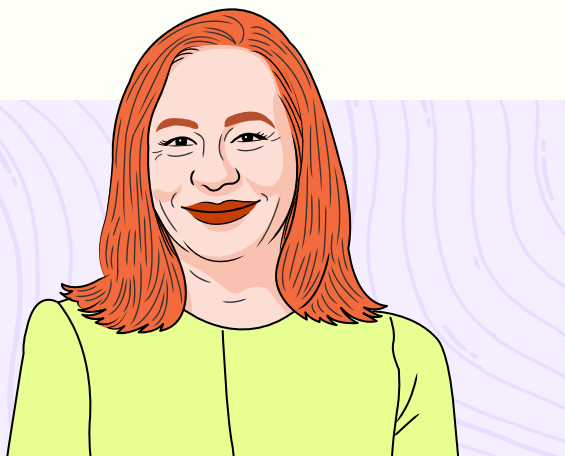
Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy is **a distinguished Sri Lankan lawyer and human rights advocate** who has dedicated her career to combating violence against women and promoting gender equality. As a former Chairperson of the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission and an expert in international law, **she has served in numerous high-profile roles, including as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women,** its causes and consequences. Her work has been pivotal in bringing attention to the systemic nature of gender-based violence and pushing for global legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms to protect women's rights as human rights.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: Leading the Charge on Violence Against Women

During the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Radhika played a critical role as the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, highlighting the pervasive and often hidden nature of gender-based violence worldwide. **Her contributions emphasized that violence against women is not only a private or isolated issue but a fundamental human rights violation deeply rooted in unequal power structures and societal norms.** Radhika's advocacy at the conference helped to place gender-based violence squarely on the global agenda, calling for comprehensive policies, legal reforms, and international cooperation to address and prevent abuse in all its forms.

MARÍA FERNANDA ESPINOSA

Championing Indigenous Women's Voices



Ms. María Fernanda Espinosa was already shaping a career that would bridge diplomacy, multilateral leadership, and advocacy for women's rights in 1995. Her distinguished career includes serving as President of the United Nations General Assembly (2018–2019) and as Ecuador's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility. Today, she serves as the Executive Director of GWL Voices. Yet in 1995, she was working in Ecuador to amplify the voices of indigenous women and ensure that their perspectives informed national gender agendas. She collaborated with indigenous leaders to prepare their participation in the Beijing Conference, facilitating spaces where they could articulate their priorities on issues such as land rights, cultural preservation, and political representation.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: From Grassroots in Ecuador to Global Leadership

During the Beijing Conference, María Fernanda helped bridge the gap between indigenous women's organizations and international advocacy, ensuring that indigenous women were not merely subjects of policy but active agents in its creation. Drawing on her own research, she emphasized the richness of indigenous women's insights, rooted in centuries of lived experience, and highlighted the urgent need to connect "communities of practice"—those who enact change on the ground—with the so-called "communities of knowledge production," which often dominate policy and academic spaces. Reflecting on that experience, she shares:

"I understood global diplomacy and I understood also that indigenous women and community level agendas, and political agendas can really enrich and feed global agendas. That helped me a great deal when being in a more multilateral global positions to look for the wisdom at the very local level, also in including culturally different perspectives, and the issues also of the common good and the collective actions, because I learn that their way of living was collective and I think that has also enriched the global agenda in big ways."

>> Her Voice Today: Translating Local Wisdom into Global Policy

For María Fernanda, a key challenge remains translating the importance of **women's rights as a transversal issue within today's geopolitical landscape**. She emphasizes:



"The women's rights agenda is not only about women's issues, it is about everything that happens in the world."



"It is not just women caring about their immediate environment or their immediate rights, but caring about the world. When you translate that in the multilateral space then you see, first of all, how much women are underrepresented in leadership. How women sometimes are neglected, in terms of policy, in terms of investment, in terms of political participation. But at the same time, **you can also see and track how important the voices, the agency and the contribution of women have been not only in the local space but globally.**"

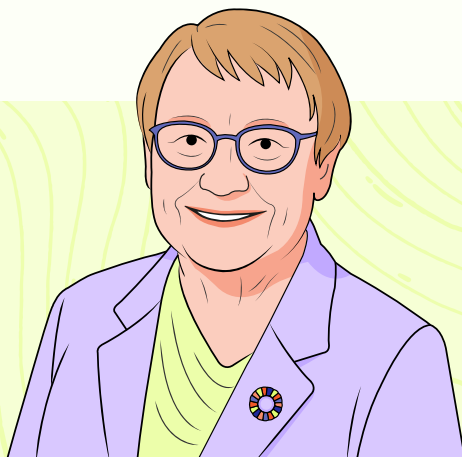
For María Fernanda, **"the voices of indigenous women have moved the needle,"** which is why their perspectives must continue to be heard and integrated at every level of policymaking.



Read the full interview
at [GWL Voices.org](https://www.gwlvoices.org)

TARJA HALONEN

A Nordic Vision for Global Equality



At the 1995 Beijing Conference, Ms. Tarja Halonen spoke as Finland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, highlighting her country's strong Nordic commitment to gender equality and human rights. Drawing on Finland's pioneering history as the first country to grant women full political rights in 1906, **she emphasized that achieving real equality requires more than laws—it demands practical action.** Tarja's leadership combined principled advocacy with pragmatic solutions, addressing key issues like education, health, political participation, and economic independence. Her influential role at Beijing was part of a distinguished career that later led her to become Finland's first female President.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: "Sister and friends, let us do it"

Tarja's address was bold in its clarity: **reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and equal pay were framed not as optional aspirations but as essential components of democracy and development**, openly addressing topics many governments avoided, such as safe abortion and male responsibility for change. **She made a compelling case that laws alone are not enough for real equality; it must be achieved in practice.** Tarja called for strong measures on education, health, political participation, and economic independence, and championed an optional protocol to CEDAW to help women seek justice for rights violations—an idea realized in 1999. **Emphasizing that gender equality benefits everyone, she urged the world to act with her rallying call: "Sisters and friends, let us do it."** Her words remain a lasting testament to the necessity and possibility of feminist diplomacy.

>> Her Voice Today: Guarding Beijing's Legacy Amid New Challenges

Thirty years after the landmark Beijing World Conference on Women, Tarja reflects on its enduring impact.

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"I remember well the spirit of Beijing and the solidarity between women throughout the negotiation process. Beijing gave hope to millions of women all over the world and exceeded expectations. The work continues to ensure that women would enjoy the rights that they have been promised also in real life," she says.



As Finland's President, Tarja carried this momentum forward, embedding gender equality across policy and affirming Finland's role in advancing women's rights. **"Finland is a pioneer on women's rights and has become a steward of gender equality. Finland was the first country in the world to grant both women and men full political rights ... Global unity in Beijing for women's rights gave us even more confidence to drive for gender equality."**

Yet she warns that progress is increasingly threatened by anti-gender movements. "At the time of the Beijing conference, the situation of women's rights was difficult. But the anti-gender movement that openly challenges the progress on gender equality has grown and strengthened afterwards, especially in western world. We should take the anti-gender movement very seriously. The backlash on women's rights is growing stronger at the same time when the global crises are affecting women and girls hardest."

“

"Our challenge is that the world is changing all the time and gender equality is a process that creates new goals. Continuous work is necessary," she concludes.



Read the full interview at [GWL Voices.org](https://www.gwlvoices.org)

NOELEEN HEYZER



A Vision for Women- Centered Development

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, **Noeleen Heyzer stood at the helm of UNIFEM as its third Executive Director (1994–2007), bringing a clear message of transformative change rooted in women’s realities.** Representing a fund founded at the first World Conference on Women, later becoming UN Women, Noeleen stressed the need to link policy commitments to real-life impacts. **Her leadership emphasized empowering women as active agents of development, not passive recipients.** She championed women’s economic and political agency, and under her direction UNIFEM’s work became a model for driving tangible improvements in women’s lives through international frameworks.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: “Less Than a Cent per Woman”

In Beijing, Noeleen exposed persistent inequalities—from poverty and lack of property rights to the silence that too often greets the birth of a girl. With urgency, **she called on governments to act on six priorities, including eliminating violence, closing education and health gaps, and implementing past UN commitments.** She underscored UNIFEM’s chronic underfunding, noting it received **“less than 1 cent to assist each woman in the developing world—imagine what we could do with a dollar.”** Her words remain a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for resources and political will to achieve gender equality.

AÏCHATOU MINDAOUDOU



Championing Women’s Rights Amidst Complex Challenges

At the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Ms. Aïchatou Mindaoudou served as Niger’s Minister of Social Development, Population, and the Promotion of Women. **Aïchatou brought a vital perspective on the intersecting challenges African women face. Her leadership highlighted the urgent need for systemic change to ensure women’s full participation in political, social, and economic life despite Niger’s harsh realities.** At a time when democracy was still consolidating in Niger, her role was pivotal in advancing women’s visibility and rights both nationally and on the global stage.

>> Her Voice in Beijing: “This Conference Must Translate Into Hope”

In her Beijing speech, **Aïchatou delivered a candid and heartfelt account of the obstacles confronting Nigerien women.** She stressed the urgency of turning the conference’s platform into tangible action, noting that past efforts had been slow and insufficient. Emphasizing women’s economic contributions—often invisible in national development—she highlighted initiatives like credit for rural women’s projects as vital steps forward. **With a call for global solidarity and cooperation, she framed the Beijing Conference as a beacon of hope for women worldwide to reclaim their dignity, rights, and rightful place in development processes: “This Conference must translate into hope,” said.**

MARY ROBINSON

A Global Voice
in Women's Rights



At the time of the 1995 Beijing Conference, Ms. Mary Robinson was serving as the President of Ireland. Known for her progressive vision, **Mary emphasized the importance of linking women's rights to broader struggles for human dignity and sustainable development. Her presidency marked a turning point in Irish politics, bringing a fresh focus on inclusion and equality.** Mary's approach to gender equality was rooted in respect for human rights as universal, indivisible, and interdependent, underscoring the need for legal and social reforms that could guarantee women's empowerment globally.

>> Her Voice at Beijing: Mary Robinson's Impact

During the Beijing Conference, **Mary delivered powerful speeches that highlighted the urgent need to address structural inequalities faced by women worldwide.** She called attention to the intersection of poverty, discrimination, and violence, emphasizing that real progress required transformative change in social, political, and economic systems. **Her participation reinforced the conference's message that gender equality is fundamental to democracy and development. Beyond her speeches, she advocated for concrete actions to translate commitments into measurable outcomes, championing a vision where women's voices shape policies at every level.**

Progress and Persistent Challenges

The Journey from Beijing 1995 to Today

Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, **the global community has made measurable progress across the 12 critical areas of concern outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.**

Significant advances include:



Improved access to education and healthcare for girls and women.



Increased political participation and leadership by women.



Expanded economic opportunities.



Strengthened legal frameworks to combat violence against women.



Enhanced efforts to address poverty and environmental sustainability.

Women worldwide have been central to driving these changes, mobilizing grassroots activism, influencing policymaking, and holding governments accountable. In the multilateral arena, institutions and agreements, such as CEDAW, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and UN Women, have provided essential platforms for cooperation and progress.

Despite these achievements, deep-rooted inequalities persist:



Gender-based violence remains a global crisis, affecting millions of women and girls.



Women are still vastly underrepresented in political and economic leadership particularly in multilateral spaces.



Unpaid care work continues to disproportionately burden women, limiting their social and economic empowerment.

Global crises—from climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic to ongoing conflicts—have deepened vulnerabilities and reversed hard-won gains, while rising anti-feminist rhetoric and rollbacks on rights threaten progress worldwide.

These challenges highlight that Beijing's transformative vision remains unfinished, demanding continued women's leadership, stronger multilateral cooperation, and renewed political will to make gender equality a lived reality for all.

A New Leadership Vision for the Future

Building on the spirit of the 1995 Beijing Conference, **GWL Voices advances a bold women's vision for structural change through ambitious reforms.** Central to this is the [Madam Secretary-General Campaign](#), advocating for the UN's first female Secretary-General, and the [Rotation for Equality Campaign](#), promoting mechanisms to guarantee gender balance at the Presidency of the UN General Assembly. These efforts challenge entrenched norms and seek more inclusive multilateral institutions.

GWL Voices champions women's leadership across global and local arenas through initiatives like [Women in Politics](#), which connects local leaders with global influence, and [Her Turn](#), which prepares the next generation through mentorship and intergenerational dialogue. Guided by evidence, the flagship report [Women in Multilateralism](#) tracks progress and gaps, ensuring advocacy is rooted in data. By uniting reforms, leadership development, and research, **GWL Voices carries forward Beijing's vision toward a more equitable global future.**

Conclusion

30 Years Is Too Long to Wait

Reflecting on three decades since Beijing, **GWL Voices members affirm a unanimous truth: 30 years is too long to wait for gender equality.** They would remind their younger selves to persist, trust in women's leadership, and embrace new strategies and voices, knowing the struggle requires both patience and urgency.

As 2030 approaches and the SDGs remain unmet, **GWL Voices calls on governments, institutions, and citizens to renew commitments and accelerate action.** Bold reforms, women's leadership, and determination are essential to confront persistent inequalities.



A new type of leadership must guide our collective efforts in multilateralism, ensuring that no one is left behind and that progress is truly transformative and lasting. This new and inclusive vision is a women's leadership.

Because “women's rights are human rights”—a demand for justice and equality that must be realized now, not in another 30 years.

www.gwlvoices.org



LEADING CHANGE,
DRIVING LEADERSHIP