This 8 March marks 100 years since Clara Zetkin first proposed the annual International Women’s Day (IWD) at the International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen, Denmark, a motion unanimously approved by over 100 women from 17 countries. When IWD was honoured for the first time the following year, more than one million women and men attended rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, vote, be trained, to hold public office and end discrimination.

This year also marks 15 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a global clarion call that recognised women's issues as global and universal. This historic Platform for Action was a powerful agenda with carefully developed strategies for the empowerment of women. For the majority of women, it has been a long journey marked with struggles. Now, the current financial, energy and food crisis threatens to erode the meagre gains made over the past years.

The theme of this year's IWD - 'Equal rights, equal opportunity: Progress for all' - is taking place when the women’s movement the world over is at a crossroads. Women attending the Beijing +15 review conference are in agreement, women have been missing from the decision-making table for too long. 'If you are missing at the table you are part of the menu, and women are saying enough is enough,' said a delegate from Zambia.

Though previous celebrations of IWD have usually been marked with pomp and ceremony, with women taking to the streets or holding powerful luncheons, this year seems to be marked with some soul searching among gender activists. 'We have realised that it is not business as usual, we need to start leveraging women’s issues into the wider world perspective,' says Deborah Okumu, a delegate from Kenya.

According to her, whatever happens in any part of the world affects women worldwide. She says women need to come up with strategies of re-influencing the Beijing Platform for Action and positioning it to make sense in the new world order debate. 'Equal opportunities have remained elusive for women for all these years, especially in countries which have experienced conflicts,' she says. 'Time has come for women to harness the gains we have realised and re-position the women’s issues at the table of decision-makers.'

As the conference enters its second week on this auspicious day, many women may feel the same way as Lena Lewis, a US socialist who in 1910 declared that it was not a time for celebrating, but a day to anticipate the struggles ahead. She envisaged a day when 'we may eventually and forever stamp out the last vestige of male egotism and his desire to dominate over women.'

For women in Africa, the struggle for women’s emancipation has been jeopardised by many challenges facing the region, such as the feminisation of poverty, conflicts and wars, HIV/AIDS,
violence against women, and maternal mortality, among others. According Micheline
Ravololonarisoa, chief of UNIFEM's Africa Section, these issues concern a majority of women,
especially now as the UN is undergoing restructuring and a new UN agency for women is proposed.
'Women’s voices need to be heard loud and clear on the establishment of the new agency since time
has come for governments to start investing on gender equality,' she said.

The Head of Chinese Delegation to 54th Session of the UN CSW Meng Xiaosi told a high level event
to commemorate International Women’s Day at the UN last week that the women’s revolution might
be the longest revolution ever known to humankind. According to her, gender equality is not a reality
in many countries, even though studies show that countries who are not allowing women to be at the
same level as men are poor, while those who have mainstreamed gender equality are rich.

'Unless the world start equating economic growth of countries with gender equality, we will continue
witnessing many crises in years to come,' she said. According to her women and men are never born
enemies, but equal partners. And women’s advancement not only brings integrity and happiness to
women but also better life and joy to all and the International Women’s Day not only belongs to
women but also to all people of the world.

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* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [4] or comment online at Pambazuka News [5].

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