

**United Nations**  **Nations Unies**

**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-fourth session  
New York, 1-12 March 2010**

**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**Regional Perspectives in Progress Achieved and Remaining Gaps and  
Challenges in the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action**

Written statement

Submitted by

**Noeleen Heyzer  
Executive Secretary  
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

#### Background and introduction

It is a privilege for me to address you this afternoon. I am very pleased to see so many longstanding colleagues and friends who have committed themselves to making a difference in women's lives.

Fifteen years ago, many of us gathered in Beijing where we turned the Fourth World Conference on Women into an event that looked at the world through women's eyes, and demanded gender equality. Our hard work led to the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action – the women's empowerment agenda – a concrete and visionary strategy to achieve equality for women.

#### Achievements in the region

As we review progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, let me highlight some of the achievements in the Asia-Pacific region.

The region has made significant progress in improving the lives of millions of women and girls over the past 15 years. The greatest success of the region as a whole has been with freeing more than 350 million people from extreme poverty between 1990 and 2004.

In recognition of women's rights as human rights, all countries in the Asia-Pacific region, except four, have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Fifteen of these ratifications happened in the last 15 years.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this Convention, countries are adopting laws and policies to promote women's rights. For example, at least 27 out of 49 member countries in the Asia-Pacific region already have, or are in the process of developing, national action plans, policies and/or laws to combat violence against women.

Nearly all governments across the region have now established a singular mechanism, such as a Department for Women's Affairs, to advance women's rights.

The region is an early MDG achiever in reducing gender disparities in primary and tertiary education. Some countries have put in place incentives such as conditional cash transfers and stipends to encourage parents to keep girls in schools.

Many governments in the region recognize gender as an important pillar in poverty reduction strategies. Some are even promoting investment in women as "smart economics".

#### Persistent challenges

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite our solid progress over the past 15 years, persistent obstacles and challenges still remain. The Asia-Pacific region accounts for half the world's maternal deaths, with one-quarter of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Pacific Island's Forum Secretariat

million women dying each year during child birth or from preventable pregnancy related complications.

Violations of women's rights continue. The rise of extremism in the name of religion and culture has led to the closing of spaces for women. And women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected by conflict. Clearly we must increase our efforts to ensure that all victims of violence are protected, all perpetrators of violence are held accountable, and that future violence against women is prevented.

Although some progress has been made in promoting women's participation in decision-making, Nepal and New Zealand are the only two countries in Asia-Pacific that have national parliaments in which more than 30 percent of representatives are women.<sup>2</sup>

Women are more likely to lose their jobs as a result of the ongoing economic crisis, as they constitute the majority of low-skilled, low-salaried and temporary workers—the flexible workforce that can easily be drawn upon or dropped depending on market conditions. Women are also more likely to be laid off because of male breadwinner bias.

Establishment of national women's machineries has not always translated into the necessary authority, status and adequate financial and human resources for them to influence government policy and ensure implementation.

One particular issue in our region is that of small island developing states. I recently returned from Pacific regional consultations in Vanuatu. One recurrent message was that the challenges I just outlined are magnified in the small, isolated, vulnerable, and low capacity island developing countries of our region. For example, today the percentage of women parliamentarians in Pacific countries is only 3.1 per cent<sup>3</sup>, which is one of the lowest in the world. This shortage of women in political institutions may have serious consequences for the framing of the political agenda, and more importantly for the promotion of women's issues.

#### Outcome of the Asia-Pacific Beijing +15 Review

Last November, close to 400 representatives of ESCAP member and associate member States, UN entities, and non-governmental organizations from the Asia Pacific region gathered in Bangkok to review implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and its Regional and Global Outcomes.

Organized in collaboration with UNIFEM, the Meeting culminated in the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration on Beijing + 15. The Declaration represents the region's input to the 15-year global review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Bangkok Declaration reaffirmed the commitment of ESCAP member States to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Our member States committed to

---

<sup>2</sup> Inter-parliamentary union (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif310110.htm>)

undertake specific concerted actions to achieve equality for women across the 12 critical areas of concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action.

In addition, member States demonstrated a high level of commitment and strong support for the role of the UN in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women in the region. They specifically requested ESCAP to strengthen its support to gender equality initiatives across the region, including mainstreaming gender in all its own programmes.

ESCAP member States also welcomed the proposed changes in the United Nations gender architecture to support progress on gender equality and women's empowerment at the global level, and noted the need for the new global entity to cooperate closely with ESCAP at the regional level, through, among other things, the Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism, which is convened by ESCAP and comprises over 25 UN regional and subregional entities in Asia-Pacific.

The level of attendance at the Meeting was unprecedented and reflects the commitment of governments, civil society and UN entities to promote gender equality and empowerment of women.

Moving forward in achieving gender equality

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Meeting the challenges I just outlined will continue to be our priority until real progress is made. Unfortunately, we have to tackle those challenges in the context of multiple threats to development. The economic crisis and climate change threaten to reverse gains we have already achieved, particularly the freeing of more than 350 million people from extreme poverty between 1990 and 2004.

Asia-Pacific is home to more than 60 percent of the world's population. Progress in the region, or lack thereof, will therefore have a profound impact on global performance in all areas of development, including the Millennium Development Goals. At ESCAP, we are according highest priority to our work to improve the lives of women, who constitute more than half of the world's women. We stand ready to fully support our member States in this endeavour.

It is crucial that the priorities and needs of women are at the heart of our response to the economic crisis. This must include access to credit, support for women's businesses, and an increased investment in agriculture to guarantee that food, water and energy security are measures that will support long term economic growth as well as improve outcomes for women.

Climate change adaptation will magnify a number of existing challenges to women. It will increase the magnitude and frequency of natural disasters in our region. While climate change will undoubtedly affect everyone, women are among the most highly impacted due to gender-based division of labour and existing gender inequalities. Women and children are more likely to be victims of natural disasters than men, thus further challenging progress towards the MDG 3 targets.

A vital lesson from the decades of campaigning leading up to Beijing, and from the 15 years since, is that one fundamental issue underlies progress in all these areas – power. That is, who makes the decisions, who drives the agenda, and who benefits?

Ensuring that women have full and equal access to decision-making at all levels – from global politics and macro-economic policy making to household management – is ultimately critical to real and sustained progress in all the critical areas of the Beijing Platform of Action.

Women must be legitimate participants in all spheres of public life – as leaders in government, businesses and the broader community. If their voices are not heard and acted upon, their aspirations, needs and concerns will not be addressed with the urgency they deserve.

For this reason, ESCAP is emphasizing support for women’s leadership as a key area of its work to promote gender equality in the region. This will include a focus on emerging leadership amongst young women – those leaders who will in the future carry forward the flame of those who helped to light the fires of Beijing.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, fifteen years has made a difference to the lives of women and girls, and progress is visible. But that progress has to be sustained, nurtured and reinforced. As a region, Asia-Pacific is fast emerging as a leader in the global community in so many fronts. The region is poised to rise to greater heights of achievement if we can accelerate our efforts to ensure that our women and girls reach their full potential, and live lives free from poverty, free from fear, and free from discrimination.

I thank you.