

Asia Pacific: putting people at the centre and promoting regional integration



In October 2009 movements from the Asia Pacific region representing a broad section of women and girls gathered at the NGO Forum on Beijing +15 and reaffirmed the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) as a strategic document for women and girls' empowerment, human rights, peace, human security and gender-inclusive development. The Forum affirmed the UN General Assembly's resolution for the establishment of a new agency dedicated to gender issues. It also identified the concurrent crises in development, debt, climate change, food security, conflicts and finances, and increasing violence against women as having the most severe impact on girls and women's rights across the region. The forum also asserted that the current development and market models need to be significantly rethought to increase human security rather than become an obstacle to it.

The Asia and Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15¹

The Asia and Pacific NGO forum acknowledged the positive effect of international instruments on the lives of women and girls. They highlighted the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in all but 4 countries – Brunei Darussalam, Nauru, Palau, Tonga – as a positive step. Additionally, several countries in the region such as Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia; and India, Nepal and Bangladesh in South Asia now have National Action Plans to combat violence against women.² Laws and policies are being adopted to strengthen women's economic security and rights in such vital areas as decent employment, and access to credit and markets.³ Furthermore, in some countries quotas or other affirmative measures were adopted to increase women's representation in political decision-making in a number of countries, such as Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Timor Leste.⁴ And some countries in the region took steps to improve health outcomes for women and girls and implement measures to reduce gender gaps in literacy and in primary and secondary education.

Crises for women's status

Despite these advances, the forum recognized the enormous and complex challenges still facing women and girls in the region and the constant struggle to deal with surmounting crises. They were especially concerned by the impact of these crises on women's rights.

Crisis in legislation

According to the forum concerns remain at the policy level, with the continued existence of discriminatory laws against women and the resistance of some

countries to ratify international instruments including the CEDAW, the Optional Protocol, and to fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action. Moreover, in some countries in the region, women's rights activists are being persecuted, harassed, detained and prosecuted for drawing attention to women's rights.

There is a particular concern that some governments and certain political parties resort to manipulating the right of people to cultural and religious diversity as a pretext for violating human rights, including the rights guaranteed to women, girls, HIV/AIDS survivors, and persons with diverse sexual orientations. The criminalization of women and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community results in varied human rights violations including the penalization, discrimination and criminalization of homosexuality in a number of countries.

Crisis in democracy and participation

The principle of participatory democracy is in distress across the Asia Pacific Region. Systematic persecution of legitimate dissenters and human rights defenders, especially women, and their families is widespread. Repressive political systems prohibit women's rights activists from sharing their experiences with the international community and media bans are an obstacle to accessing and distributing information. Women's NGOs and women's rights activists are subject to intimidation tactics which consist of shutting down NGOs and harassing rights activists to prevent them from playing their full role in supporting women's rights. Increasingly conservative laws and discriminatory regulations are being introduced that escalate rights violations and augment the number of women and girls without access to education, health, mobility, employment, and reproductive and sexual services.

Women continue to struggle for equal representation and engagement in the new e-technologies and media. Despite the explosion in this medium over the past 15 years women lack access to it and are discouraged from acquiring this knowledge. In many cases technology is used as a tool to subjugate and forge violence and discrimination against women. There is a need to democratize access to information and for governments to make this a priority if participatory democracy is to be fully available to women. In this area the media has a special role

and responsibility in affirming all aspects of women's lives and investing in research regarding their impact women's status.

Political crises and conflict

Prolonged political crises, religious extremisms, fundamentalisms and military dictatorships in some countries in the region continue to disproportionately affect women and girls' rights and create critical situations and insecurity for this segment of the population. The magnitude of violence against women and girls during armed conflict lacks recognition from states and attention across the region. Furthermore, those affected by conflict remain marginalized within conflict resolution and peace building processes and impunity prevails for the violent perpetrators. Interstate and intra-state conflicts continue to pose a great challenge to the lives and socio-economic conditions of women and girls. This is exacerbated in politically unstable countries and areas where valuable resources are siphoned into militarization and military equipment as well as training despite the significant needs among women, girls and society as a whole.

Women and girls constitute some 80 per cent of the world's refugees and other displaced persons including internally displaced persons (IDP). And in the Asia Pacific region urgent national and international action is needed because these segments of the population in IDP and refugee camps remain unaddressed. Natural or man-made disasters such as armed conflicts, skewed economic policies and, so called, development initiatives are some of the causes for increasing internal displacements.

The crisis of violence

Despite some advances in decreasing violence against women it continues to be a major concern across all geographic and demographic areas in the Asia and Pacific region. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) continues and damages young girls and women. There are increasing reports of violent sorcery killings, witch hunts and honor killings of women and girls and rape as an instrument of war or colonization. Growing issues include new and pervasive forms of violence that are emerging alongside new media and technology, with cyber bullying and violence becoming a rising problem for young girls.

1 This document is based on the Final Declaration – written with input from 700 women and girl participants – the Asia and Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15.

2 The Asia and Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15, Key Note Address, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, October 2009, Manila Philippines.

3 Key Note Address, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer.

4 Key Note Address, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer.

Threats to women and girls' rights

Threats to women and girls human rights take place amidst tremendous uncertainties and multiple crises in the financial, food, ecological, consumption, health and reproduction spheres and these emergencies led to widespread economic displacements. As a result today the limited targets set for poverty eradication within the Millennium Development Goals are almost certain to be missed especially for the most vulnerable including women with disabilities and those in indigenous and marginalized communities. This dynamic is worsened by sub-regional economic integration processes, including free trade agreements, which are based on unsustainable production and consumption, wealth concentration and growing social gaps and a disconnect between the productive and reproductive spheres of society.

The development model and market driven economies

The dominant development paradigm continues to be guided by market ideology that favors growth of capital through privatization, trade liberalization, and rolling back the responsibilities of the State, at the cost of human well being of the poor, particularly women. As a result, there is food insecurity and unemployment all of which have drastic impacts on the livelihood of the poor. Inequalities have increased even as economic growth is recorded in many countries of the region. These situations lead to protests which are often violently suppressed and lead to greater despair among the more marginalized and vulnerable, especially women and girls.

The debt burden and the global financial crisis

The brunt of the debt burden in the region is borne by women. Loans taken on by states, under the guise of national development and progress are not utilized

for the benefit of the population much less women. Billions of dollars appropriated annually for loan repayments could greatly finance much needed basic social services to support women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities. However, corruption and badly negotiated agreements means the money does not "trickle" down to where it is most needed.

Due to the worsening economic situation and global financial crisis girls and young women are forced to set aside their education to enter the labor force. Furthermore, in many cases they are pushed into domestic work, the entertainment industry and the sex trade. The desperate economic and violent situations are driving increasing numbers of women and girls to find partners through the internet where they are "married" into domestic and sexual slavery. Consequently, women find themselves in foreign countries with little or no access to services or legal representation. More needs to be done to address the root causes of human trafficking in its various forms including migration created by economic inequalities which to date has not been addressed in programs, policy, and legislative areas.

Climate change

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the increasing frequency in the region of extreme climate instabilities and natural disasters which total nearly 50 percent more than the global average. This region has already witnessed the first relocation of entire communities due to rising sea levels and climate change and it is expected that small island states in the region will be the most affected in the near future. Natural disasters involve complex interactions of factors – climatic, social, political, economic, institutional and technological. Moreover, corporate-induced calamities are causing havoc in entire communities. Many of these man-made disasters are driven by large-scale quarry-

ing, mining, deforestation, construction of dams, increased pollution from the burning of fossil fuels, and conversion for commercial crop cultivation or urban enclaves, including proposed carbon reduction schemes.

Aid and gender

Finally, most actors in development cooperation have shown inadequacy in making true gender equality commitments and money and resources have failed to match rhetoric. Implementation and accountability towards promoting women's rights and gender equality through mainstreaming efforts have been ad hoc, unpredictable, inconsistent and are vulnerable to hostile reaction. This inadequacy is linked to the lack of understanding of the diverse social, economic, cultural and political contexts that exists for women and the lack of strong national and international mechanisms to bring about the desired changes in the current status of women.

Forging the future

For women and girls present at the Forum much needs to be done to continue making advances on behalf of women and girls. First and foremost they recognize the women's movement is crucial and must be strengthened to move this process forward. Moreover, the participants in the Forum prioritized the need for governments and the United Nations to address the effects of the concurrent crises on women. The needs went beyond advancing the Beijing Platform to including a call for sustainable development that places human well being at the core of policy making. The participants called for sub-regional economic integration processes and national development plans that rest on the principles and practices of ecological sustainability, food sovereignty, financial inclusion, universal social protection, economic solidarity and fair trade. ■