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**CLOSING GENDER GAPS IN ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

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Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

The Asia-Pacific region is the engine of global economic growth and has some of the world's most dynamic economies. The region has made impressive progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in several areas. Despite positive trends in some areas, however, the progress has been uneven, and disturbing gender disparities and discrimination remain. The present document tracks the progress related to gender equality and empowerment across all the Millennium Development Goals. It establishes clear linkages between the Goals and other frameworks for ensuring gender equality and empowerment, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. It also briefly examines the potential impact of the global economic crisis on the Millennium Development Goals, especially those relating to gender. It concludes that the promotion of gender equality is not restricted to Goal 3 alone, but is vital to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals, and that Governments in the region need to focus on key policies and programmes that address gender gaps at all levels in order to ensure steady progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and inclusive social development in the region.

* The late submission of the present document is due to an effort to include the most up-to-date information in consultation with other United Nations agencies and other partners.

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Introduction

1. Gender equality and women's empowerment is not just a development goal in itself, it is vital for attaining all the other goals, and it is the driver of efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve primary education, reduce child and maternal mortality, and fight major diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. There is solid evidence to show that progress towards achieving gender equality in one goal often contributes simultaneously towards progress in achieving a number of other development goals. For example, gender equality in education also makes significant contributions to a nation's economic growth and poverty reduction, as well as to reduced malnutrition, fertility and child mortality.¹

I. TRACKING PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

2. The Asia-Pacific region is an economic powerhouse with some of the world's most dynamic economies, and it has made impressive progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in several areas. The greatest success of the region as a whole has been to reduce the number of people living in extreme poverty from 1.9 billion to 641 million between 1990 and 2004. Despite these achievements, the Asia-Pacific region is still home to more than half of the world's population living on less than \$1 per day.² The region is an early achiever in reducing gender disparities in primary and tertiary education. The health of the region's population has improved, with more children surviving beyond the age of five years. Many countries have achieved 100 per cent net primary school enrolment. The region has also taken positive steps towards achieving gender equality in schools and in the workplace.

¹ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Making the MDGs Work for All: Gender-responsive Rights-based Approaches to the MDGs* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008).

² ESCAP, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, *The Millennium Development Goals: Progress in Asia and the Pacific 2007* (Bangkok, 2007) (ST/ESCAP/2465).

Although the Asia-Pacific region is doing well on average, no country in the region will achieve all of the Millennium Development Goal targets.

3. Despite positive trends in some of these areas, progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals has been uneven, and disturbing gender disparities and discrimination remain. Nearly all the countries of the Asia-Pacific region are parties to CEDAW³ and equality between the sexes is expressly guaranteed in many constitutions and statutes. Yet, notwithstanding these promising formal commitments and the demonstrated benefits of gender equality to societies and economies, gender discrimination remains pervasive in the region.⁴

4. Gender discrimination is visible in the low access of women and girls to economic opportunities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), many women are confined to home-based and reproductive work, which reduces family income and overall economic growth.⁵ FAO also estimates that 60 per cent of food farmers in Asia are women. In addition, there is still widespread discrimination against women and girls in the workplace. Women are predominantly employed in labour-intensive, low-valued manufacturing and service sector jobs, which are vulnerable to domestic and global shifts in demand. ESCAP estimates that the cost to the region of continuing gender discrimination could reach \$80 billion per year.⁶ To reduce women's poverty and hunger and the impact of household poverty on women and girls, the region needs to implement effective strategies that include (a) adopting pro-poor, gender-responsive and rights-based macroeconomic policies, (b) improving sex-disaggregated poverty statistics, (c) investing in time-saving infrastructure, especially in rural areas and poor communities, (d) increasing women's access to land, property, credit and other resources, (e) empowering women and girls, and (e) ensuring non-discrimination on the basis of sex.⁷

5. One of the fundamental reasons women are subject to discrimination is that they do not have a voice in decision-making, whether at home or in society, even in matters that directly affect them. With women accounting for half of the population, one would expect that they should have at least an equal number of representatives in elected bodies at the local, regional and national levels. However, the reality in the region is starkly different. Only 13 countries have parliaments in which more than 20 per cent of the representatives are women, with New Zealand and Nepal having the highest rates at 33.6 and 33.2 per cent, respectively.⁸ Gender-responsive rights-based strategies that promote women's participation in decision-making include the legislation of quotas for women, supporting the training of potential female political candidates, training for women parliamentarians, and supporting advocacy for gender budgeting initiatives by female parliamentarians.⁹

³ General Assembly resolution 34/180, annex.

⁴ ESCAP, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, *Pursuing Gender Equality through the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific* (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Women and rural employment", *Economic and Social Perspectives*, Policy Brief No. 5 (August 2009).

⁶ ESCAP, *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2007: Surging Ahead in Uncertain Times* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.II.F.4).

⁷ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Making the MDGs Work for All: Gender-responsive Rights-based Approaches to the MDGs* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008).

⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in national parliaments" (2009), accessed from www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm on 13 October 2009.

⁹ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Making the MDGs Work for All: Gender-responsive Rights-based Approaches to the MDGs* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008).

6. The goal that is most off-track pertains to maternal health. The ESCAP region accounts for half of the world's maternal deaths, with 250,000 women dying each year during childbirth or from pregnancy-related complications. South Asia alone accounts for two thirds of maternal deaths in the region. To address the challenges to maternal health, there is a need to adopt measures that promote women's access to reproductive health care, improve women's access to transportation and communication, and involve men and communities in maternal health care.

7. A disturbing trend in the region is the persistence in a number of countries of child mortality ratios of girls that are higher than the child mortality ratios of boys. On the basis of biological factors, the ratio of girls' to boys' deaths would ordinarily be much less than 1; in Australia and New Zealand, for example, the ratios are 0.83 and 0.85, respectively. In 16 countries in the region, however, the ratio is 0.99 or greater.¹⁰ Eliminating extreme poverty, and promoting gender equality and empowering women are essential to reducing child mortality. Gender-responsive strategies that directly address child mortality include identifying and addressing factors contributing to higher mortality among girls where this occurs, addressing factors that lead to the sex-selective abortion of females, and targeting health education and information to fathers and other men.¹¹

8. The feminization of HIV/AIDS is another disturbing trend. The share of women living with HIV increased from 45 per cent in 1990 to 50 per cent in 2007. Of particular concern is the growing prevalence among married women and young women. The Commission on AIDS in Asia estimated that more than 50 million women are at risk of contracting HIV from intimate partners who had been infected during paid sex or when injecting drugs.¹² In addition, widespread violence against women not only represents a global human rights crisis but also contributes to women's vulnerability to HIV. Some gender-responsive rights-based strategies include (a) providing access to knowledge on HIV and AIDS, (b) improving knowledge of women's reproduction and sexuality among both women and men, (c) supporting primary caregivers for people with AIDS, and children orphaned by AIDS, and (d) eliminating discrimination and stigma against women living with HIV.¹³

9. The Asia-Pacific region is responsible for 34 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Women are more severely affected by environmental degradation and a lack of access to natural resources. They often bear the primary responsibility for agricultural work, collecting water and fuel, and ensuring household security. The number of people affected by natural disasters in the region is nearly 50 per cent more than the global average. Women and children are 14 times more likely to be victims of natural disasters than men, thus further challenging Millennium Development Goal 3 targets. It is therefore important to ensure that women participate actively in environmental initiatives, that water and sanitation initiatives take gender equality and human rights into account, and that environmental sustainability projects build the capabilities of girls and women.¹⁴

¹⁰ ESCAP, Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, *Pursuing Gender Equality through the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific* (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

¹¹ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Making the MDGs Work for All: Gender-responsive Rights-based Approaches to the MDGs* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008).

¹² Commission on AIDS in Asia, *Redefining AIDS in Asia: Crafting an Effective Response* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹³ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Making the MDGs Work for All: Gender-responsive Rights-based Approaches to the MDGs* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

10. Slow progress or setbacks in all of the Millennium Development Goals will have repercussions on the prospects for improving women's capabilities, opportunities, security and access to resources. Slow progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals is often due to a gap between commitment and implementation, which needs to be addressed through action at the national, regional and international levels. The region needs to do more in terms of strategy, implementation and resources in order to meet all the Goals in time and in a gender responsive way. A gender balance can be achieved with limited resources, but this requires changes at the household, societal and national levels. In particular, mainstreaming gender concerns in public policies, programmes and spending could make a difference. In 2007, the Philippines was the only country in the region (and one of only five in the world) to have closed the gender gap in both education and health, an achievement that reflects the importance of high-level political commitment.¹⁵

II. THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

11. In 2008, the food, fuel and financial crises converged to threaten development in the Asia-Pacific region. The global economic crisis is expected to affect the region's economy through four major channels of impact: (a) falling exports and aggregate demand; (b) reversals in domestic and foreign migration; (c) tightened credit markets; and (d) strained fiscal budgets. These same impacts constitute the major channels of transmission that could affect women and families, and subsequently the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the region. The first three channels will have first-round impacts that will directly affect women's incomes and livelihood opportunities, with implications for the achievement of Millennium Development Goals 1 and 3. Indirectly, however, second-round impacts at the household level will also have implications for the achievement of other Goals. The loss of female income is likely to have a greater impact on household welfare, as women tend to spend a greater proportion of their income on meeting the basic needs of household members. At the same time, household coping strategies that result from falling incomes tend to disproportionately affect women and girls; for instance, experience with past crises has shown that girls are highly vulnerable to being withdrawn from school to cope with declining incomes.¹⁶

12. The global economic crisis threatens to reverse development gains and stop progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Not only is progress towards achieving the Goals slowing, but in many areas, even the hard-won gains of recent years are under threat. However, the crisis could be turned into an opportunity to jump-start a regional reorientation towards a more inclusive and sustainable development path.¹⁷ The crisis has intensified the need for strengthened global partnerships for development as reflected in Millennium Development Goal 8. The G-20 summit in April underlined the importance of not cutting back on official development assistance commitments during the crisis. It is, however, delivery on these commitments and the equitable allocation of resources in the region that will make the difference.¹⁸

¹⁵ ESCAP, *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2007: Surging Ahead in Uncertain Times* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.II.F.4).

¹⁶ Schwetlana Sabarwal, Nista Sinha and Mayra Buvinic, *The Global Financial Crisis: Assessing Vulnerability for Women and Children*, World Bank Policy Brief (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2009).

¹⁷ ESCAP, *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2009: Addressing Triple Threats to Development* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.09.II.F.11).

¹⁸ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.09.I.12).

III. ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

13. While gender equality advocates have pursued several initiatives to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, efforts to do so by linking the Goals to broader human rights instruments, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action¹⁹ have proven to be the most promising. Experience on the ground suggests a number of ways in which these processes can be harnessed and promoted as mutually supporting processes:

(a) *Linking the Millennium Development Goals to Human Rights, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action.* Linking these would change the nature of the discourse from achieving development goals to meeting concrete human rights obligations and would give importance to whether the ends being achieved are benefiting people in a non-discriminatory way. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights,²⁰ the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights²¹ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights²² are the key instruments that enshrine the principles of non-discrimination. These are reinforced by specific conventions such as CEDAW, which clearly articulates the meaning and nature of gender-based discrimination and contains guarantees of equality between women and men.²³

(b) *Human rights and gender equality norms can help reinforce the Millennium Development Goals as an agenda for political action.* By their very nature, human rights norms are centred on the relationships between a Government and its citizens, and the domestic political processes and mechanisms that define these relationships; as such, they serve as a powerful mobilizing discourse to influence political outcomes and social consensus.²⁴

(c) *At the operational level, human rights instruments and CEDAW can provide practical guidance by interpreting rights protected by treaties, establishing standards for their implementation and setting out targets and indicators for monitoring progress.* While these instruments have no binding legal effect, they nonetheless have moral force and are widely regarded as authoritative.²⁵ The Beijing Platform for Action complements CEDAW by providing a substantive treatment of gender issues, defining strategic objectives and actions, and establishing institutional and financial arrangements.

(d) *Establishing linkages can help to strengthen the accountability of Governments to their citizens through processes that enable broad participation in assessing progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.* These processes

¹⁹ *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution I, annex II.

²⁰ General Assembly resolution 217 A (III).

²¹ See General Assembly resolution 2200 A (XXI), annex.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *CEDAW and the Human Rights Based Approach to Programming: A UNIFEM Guide* (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2007); G.R. Painter, *Gender, the Millennium Development Goals, and Human Rights in the Context of the 2005 Review Processes*, Report for the Gender and Development Network (2004).

²⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Frequently Asked Questions on a Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Cooperation* (New York and Geneva, United Nations, 2006).

²⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Frequently Asked Questions on a Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Cooperation* (New York and Geneva, United Nations, 2006); G.R. Painter, *Gender, the Millennium Development Goals, and Human Rights in the Context of the 2005 Review Processes*, Report for the Gender and Development Network (2004).

include parliamentary committees, the use of human rights and gender equality tools and impact assessments, social accountability processes, and administrative and judicial mechanisms.

(e) *Tools such as gender analysis and linking the Millennium Development Goals to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action review processes can provide a more in-depth analysis of whether the Millennium Development Goals are being achieved while addressing the root causes of poverty and discrimination.* For instance, in 2003, the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported a project to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in Cambodia. The project led to the inclusion of indicators that were meant to capture the more varied dimensions of gender equality across the Goals. It also provided an opportunity for capacity-building and institution-building that should have ultimately influenced the updating of the poverty reduction strategy of Cambodia. More specifically, the project (a) involved women's groups in policy dialogues, (b) established a national women's network and (c) provided capacity-building for a range of stakeholders, including the government agencies responsible for formulating, implementing and monitoring the poverty reduction strategy of Cambodia.²⁶

IV. USING HUMAN RIGHTS, THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION STANDARDS TO SUPPORT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: EXAMPLES FROM ASIA

14. In Fiji, the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team and the UNDP Pacific Centre collaborated on a pilot project to address one of the most significant forms of systemic human rights and gender discrimination in the Pacific: women's right to adequate housing and land. For the project, regional and national consultations were held with key stakeholders in government departments, and organizations were involved in providing housing. During regional consultations, women's stories and case studies were developed and a framework for the rights-based analysis of women's right to housing and land was adapted and utilized. The Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team and UNDP subsequently adapted and utilized a toolkit based on the one developed by the Housing and Land Right Coalition to analyse women's right to adequate housing and land, which could be used on a regional basis. The Fiji Women's Rights Movement, the national partner of the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team, has identified that women's right to adequate housing and land is a key issue among the women of Fiji, and is in partnership with the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team and UNDP to further develop this toolkit and to pilot a training and advocacy workshop on women's right to adequate housing and land in Fiji.

15. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, rights-based programming was successfully applied to the water and environmental sector, specifically to address rights to sanitation, health, education, sustainable livelihoods and food security, as well as women's right to participate in the economic and social life of the villages. A national consultation was held on implementing rights-based approaches in the water and environmental sanitation programme, in which the principles of a human rights-based approach were introduced and discussed with 70 central, provincial and district-level government representatives from the water and environmental sector across the country. A case study in Luang Prabang was used to sensitize and educate

²⁶ United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Promoting Gender Equality in the Aid Effectiveness Agenda in Asia Pacific: Engaging the Principles of the Paris Declaration*, UNIFEM Discussion Paper (New York, United Nations Development Fund for Women, November 2007).

government representatives on a human rights-based approach, their responsibilities as duty bearers and their role of rights holders in working towards effective programme responses. Village chiefs and representatives from international non-governmental organizations, the World Bank and the Australian Agency for International Development also attended. The initiative has made it possible to incorporate many of the guiding principles of rights-based programming into the programme components of the water and environmental sector.

16. In a separate initiative, the International Law Project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lao People's Democratic Republic initiated a roundtable on the right to education. The purpose of the meeting was to debate the country's current education issues and relate them to the application of a human rights-based approach. Specific attention was paid to low primary-education completion rates in rural areas, as well as lower rates among girls compared with those of boys in urban areas. An understanding surfaced that a human rights-based approach could be used as a tool to increase the participation of vulnerable groups, such as the girl child and people from remote areas, in the development process. Without providing children in remote areas and girls in both remote and urban areas with primary education, the Lao People's Democratic Republic will not achieve the Millennium Development Goal on primary education.

17. In Sri Lanka, local communities and organizations have used human rights arguments and processes to hold their government accountable for its promises and commitments. In Sri Lanka, the AidWatch initiative of UNDP empowers beneficiary communities to monitor the aid that they receive by engaging in participatory monitoring and dialogue with the development actors. This involves a parallel strategy. The first part is to raise the awareness of the rights of beneficiaries to demand accountability and transparency in the development process in which they should not remain voiceless non-actors. This is done by organizing beneficiaries into coalitions and explaining to them that "aid is not benevolence but their right" and thereby creating forums, which bring together the development actors with the beneficiaries. In these forums, discussions include sharing budgets, giving reasons for delays and taking into consideration the needs of the beneficiaries. The second part is to create a forum that would bring together the relevant government, development and civil society stakeholders. The objective of this forum is to create awareness and build consensus for them to collectively address concerns raised by the beneficiaries.²⁷

V. CONCLUSION

18. The midpoint for achieving the Millennium Development Goals has past and the region has less than six years to realize these Goals. A renewed emphasis on gender equality and empowerment is essential if the Goals are to be achieved. The promotion of gender equality is not restricted to Goal 3, but is vital for the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. Governments in the region need to focus on key policies and programmes that address gender gaps at all levels in order to ensure steady progress towards the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, and inclusive social development in the region.

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²⁷ Gabrielle Berman, *Undertaking a Human Rights-Based Approach: A Guide for Basic Programming—Documenting Lessons Learned for Human Rights-Based Programming: An Asia-Pacific Perspective, Implications for Policy, Planning and Programming* (Bangkok, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008); United Nations Development Programme, *Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals: Making the Link* (Oslo, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre, 2004).