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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

**Report of the Expert Group Meeting in Preparation for the
High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Review of Implementation of the
Beijing Platform for Action**

13-15 May 2009
Bangkok, Thailand

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. An expert group meeting in preparation for the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was held from 13-15 May 2009 in Bangkok. It was attended by experts from various parts of the Asia-Pacific region and by representatives from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

2. The meeting was opened by Ms. Thelma Kay, Chief of the Social Development Division.

3. The following substantive topics were discussed on the basis of invited papers from experts:

Session 1: Overview of the Pacific

Session 2: Overview of Central Asia

Session 3: Structural Barriers, Cultural Constraints, Meso Traps and Other Challenges

Session 4: Gender, Water Security and Climate Change

Session 5: Information Technology and Media

Session 6: Ageing

Session 7: Family and Work-Life Balance

Session 8: The Economic Crisis

4. The more detailed meeting agenda can be found in Annex 1.

II. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF MEETING

5. The following recommendations and issues of particular concern raised by experts:

Session 1: Recommendations and key messages on Pacific island countries

- Identify and amplify support for measures and strategies to strengthen institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming across the whole of government to improve multi-sectoral gender responsiveness.

- Address overarching cultural/attitudinal factors and dynamics that are barriers to gender equality and achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action. This includes rethinking and reforming impeding power structures such as masculinized social structures and systems (family structures, religious institutions, customary/community structures) and the culture of silence.

- The issue of violence against women especially in the domestic sphere is in need of greater attention from national governments in the subregion. A multi-pronged approach including the following measures is recommended: additional research; law reform; greater public discourse; community engagement and breaking down cultural attitudes which enable violence against women to continue; and increased national budgetary support for addressing it.

- Enhance measures to strengthen women's participation in politics and decision-making in the family, public and private sectors, and political arena both at the national and local level, including the use of contextually appropriate temporary special measures linked with related supports (political participation and campaigning skills development, access to finance and alleviating women's time poverty).

Session 2: Recommendations and key messages on Central Asia

- After a sharp decline in the 1990s, women's representation in decision-making has been slowly increasing, due to gender quotas. However, quotas must be complemented by other policy measures that address structural and systemic barriers preventing women from equal participation in decision-making. These measures must include gender mainstreaming of all policies and sectors; improving institutional frameworks, by introducing and/or effectively implementing legislation on gender equality; strengthening national mechanisms; conducting advocacy and education to reduce bias and stereotypes and involving men.
- Despite international commitments, the issue of violence against women continues to be on periphery, and does not receive proper attention in Central Asia. Opening public dialogue and discourse, supporting research and collecting relevant data could help to raise awareness and mobilize public support. Other recommended strategies include: greater exchange of good practices, both within and outside the sub-region, on addressing violence against women; gender sensitization and training of law enforcement personnel and health care and social workers; as well as improved legislation and monitoring of its implementation. Stronger interventions to address root causes of human trafficking in the subregion are also crucial.
- Ensuring women's economic security and access to economic assets is important. Better social protection measures for women employed in the informal sector are needed. Supporting micro-credit, self-employment and micro- and small scale entrepreneurship could help to promote women's empowerment. However, it remains essential to address the underlying structural and macroeconomic barriers which impede gender equality in Central Asia.
- HIV prevalence continues to rise in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); therefore, lessons learned from other regions must be acted upon. This includes the need for gender sensitization and mainstreaming of gender concerns into national HIV and AIDS programmes and action plans in order to effectively address the problem.
- Collection and use of gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data needs to be improved, especially in critical areas for policy responses such as women's access to resources, entrepreneurship and violence against women. Linkages between national mechanisms, civil society groups and national statistical offices need to be strengthened.
- Greater coordination and cooperation between national mechanisms and civil society groups at local, national and sub-regional level (vertical), as well as greater cooperation and solidarity between these stakeholders at regional level (horizontal), exchange of best practices and lessons learned could further contribute to the advancement of women and gender equality. ESCAP, together with other donor agencies could provide support and significantly contribute to this process.

Session 3: Recommendations and key messages on structural barriers, cultural constraints, meso-level and other challenges

- It is essential that governments reaffirm their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action as the key reference document for a broad-based transformative agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment.

- Countries should develop nationally owned agendas for change, based on the Platform and align them with all other major initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), aid effectiveness, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international commitments. Countries should also make gender equality central to the MDGs and prioritize this in national expenditure and development plans.
- Revisit the Platform for Action in light of urgent emerging issues, such as the gender considerations regarding populations displaced due to natural disasters and conflict and large female migrant worker populations.
- National women's machineries should be redefined as champion advocates - with clear mandates and adequate human and financial resources - seated at the highest levels of all key decision-making forums.
- Examine and address the barriers of dominant gender constructs (masculinities and femininities) imposed by culture and gender-based violence used to keep women disempowered. This should encompass measures such as: formulating appropriate cultural responses and strategies focused on cultural barriers, existing family laws and meso-level power structures and dynamics; addressing gender constructs in macro-level development planning; and measures focusing on work with youth and culture, especially young men.
- Revisit and develop more clearly defined operational definitions of "gender equality" and "gender mainstreaming" to facilitate tracking commitments on women's empowerment as well as measures that make financial commitments visible and which track resources for gender equality.
- Pool and build on Asia-Pacific research and enhance research capacity, including in gender statistics. Investigate why sex-disaggregated data remains unavailable despite capacity-building amongst national statistical authorities and how best to ensure such data is compiled and made widely available to the public. Promote the collection and supplementary use of qualitative data to support gender policies and women's empowerment.

Session 4: Recommendations and key messages on women and water security and climate change

- As women are prone to be more at risk to climate change than men, gender mainstreaming and increasing women's participation in natural resource management are critical.
- Conduct further research to develop and identify techniques, tools and methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to assess women's differential vulnerability within a given geo-physical, socio-economic and institutional context.
- Build the capacity of organizations working on gender, climate change and adaptation issues at the local level, particularly local government bodies.
- Engender the national adaptation plans of action and build gender accountability in climate-disaster planning and resource allocation at all levels, drawing on lessons learned from gender responsive budget initiatives in the water sector.
- Strengthen the role of global networks and alliances such as the Gender and Water Alliance towards shared or adaptive learning on the gender dimensions of climate change and adaptation.

Session 5: Recommendations and key messages on women and information technology and media

- Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the way people relate to one another and their living environment, as well as how humans organize and structure their activities, work, communities and time. They are also rapidly becoming the mode of operation for many governments, businesses and civil society processes. Given the centrality which ICTs are increasingly assuming in day-to-day life, it is important to bridge the gender digital divide, strengthen women's access to and empowerment from ICTs, to prevent the marginalization of women from the information society.
- Developments in the use of Internet and other related ICTs indicate trends which might adversely affect women and are emerging areas of concern in need of address. They include:
 - 1) A movement towards a system of tiered information access dominated by monopolistic players, primarily corporate and the creation of a system of exclusive and discriminatory – rather than egalitarian and inclusive – access to information.
 - 2) The convergence of many forms of ICTs leading to the commercialization, marketing and profiteering of media content and an environment conducive to the exploitation of women or marginalisation of gender issues.
- It is important that governments develop policies and a regulatory framework for the information society which could mitigate the adverse impacts of these trends on women. Governments may also wish to explore the creation of national mechanisms for the development of inclusive ICT policies, such as information society commissions instituted in other regions
- New technologies have opened up new opportunities for women, but have also created new vulnerabilities and forms of exploitation and violence against them. It is recommended that Governments develop and implement policies and laws which protect women from these “digital dangers”.
- The information society is rapidly and radically changing governance structures and mechanisms and basic concepts of civil rights and citizenship. It is important that gender concerns be integrated into policies and guidelines developed in these areas.
- It is important to promote strategies which strengthen the access of grassroots women to traditional media such as radio and film and introduce legal frameworks that allow grassroots women and communities' access to and ownership of media systems for community radio and telecom networks.
- It is recommended that Governments develop and promote measures and policies which integrate gender concerns in the design and development of new ICTs, related infrastructure investments and programme implementation.

Session 6: Recommendations and key messages on gender and ageing

- With the feminisation of ageing in the region, measures are needed to address the particular needs of older women. Creation of incentives for equal sharing by men and women of care-giving is recommended to mitigate the increasing burden of care work on older women.
- The abuse, neglect and harassment of older persons and women in particular, is also an issue of growing importance in the region which needs to be addressed.

- Due to child bearing and rearing, women tend to be out of the labour market or have an interrupted career which makes them less likely to have access to pension schemes. Measures are needed to reduce this vulnerability.
- Social protection measures to ensure sustainable and adequate income security for women in the informal sector and rural areas are needed.

Session 7: Recommendations and key messages on family and work-life balance

- Greater social security coverage is needed for the increasing number of ‘buffer employees’ who fall through the cracks of formal social security coverage.
- Governments should provide greater support for women in their care-giving roles and encourage a more equitable division of labour in the household and child-care responsibilities between women and men.
- Increased research on socio-cultural practices and meso-level dynamics is important for the development of progressive legislation on work-life balance.

Session 8: Recommendations and key messages on women and the economic crisis

- There is a need to engender national stimulus packages. Women’s groups should work with finance ministries, and be able to communicate with them on their level – in their “language”.
- When revenue declines, Government spending will inevitably be cut. There must be close monitoring of – and strong arguments against – cutbacks in social spending, which has previously had enormous social costs.
- As tracking public expenditure is critical, there must be more emphasis on gender-responsive budgeting and gains must be protected.
- Investment in agriculture must not be forgotten as agriculture is a key sector in economies in the region and is where a large number of women are employed.
- Microcredit must be protected. Government-owned commercial banks should be required to maintain microcredit schemes, which should be conditional if they request liquidity support from central banks.
- There is a need for more engagement with economists, and for such partners to provide guidance to gender experts on how to effectively communicate with finance ministries. It was recommended that ESCAP play a role in this type of capacity-building for civil society.

A. Discussion on the structure and content of the high-level meeting

6. In planning for the “Beijing +15” high-level meeting scheduled for the last quarter of 2009, meeting experts first sought to establish a conceptual framework on which the structure and content of the meeting could be based. They agreed that a major impediment to advancing gender equality has been a shift away from the Beijing Platform for Action as the key reference and the transformative agenda for promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. The experts identified the following pillars of an umbrella framework or “canopy” on the primary factors and issues affecting gender equality in the world today:

- 1) There has been a marginalisation of the Beijing Platform for Action, evidenced by factors such as the lack of funding for its implementation and the shift of donors' focus to service delivery.
 - 2) A democratic deficit in global governance (lack of social justice).
 - 3) Infiltration of governance spaces by non-state actors, transnational corporations and regressive forces.
 - 4) Women's human rights and women's citizenship must be preserved.
7. At the national level, the issues of failed government architectures for gender-responsiveness and of meso-level forces that constrain the effectiveness of national women's machineries, namely cultural and religious attitudes and practices within society and patriarchal family structures as well as community and local governance structures, were identified as important. It was essential to have an accountability framework centred on women's participation in institutional processes as opposed to only a capacity building approach with a "dumping" of knowledge. Additionally, experts also highlighted the need to address the barriers created by a dominant gender order, particularly its role in promulgating a "culture of violence", in order to advance gender equality in the region.
8. Experts suggested that the following theme could be considered as a way to frame the high-level meeting: "Strengthening achievement of internationally agreed development goals and aid effectiveness through the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action".
9. In addressing gender issues during the meeting, it must be remembered that women are not one homogenous group and that the diversity of women must be considered. The diverse conditions, specificities and perspectives of sub-regions within Asia-Pacific must also be considered, yet ensure that all sub-regions are integrated.
10. The gender issues facing the Asia Pacific region are myriad, and experts discussed a wide range of topics for consideration in the agenda of the high level meeting. To facilitate the process, experts prepared briefings that distilled the issues within their areas of expertise which they considered most important for Governments. Involvement of women at the grass-roots level and participation by multiple segments of society (eg. partnerships with men to advance gender equality) were also highlighted as criteria for developing an appropriate agenda.
11. Within the context of the above-mentioned framework, the following were flagged as important by the experts:
- state-sponsored violence against women;
 - impunity for violence against women;
 - the right to information legislation;
 - the new channels and e-spaces for the exploitation and empowerment of women being created by new information and communication technologies;
 - the restructuring of social protection; the increase in wage inequality;
 - impact of the economic crisis on women; improving labour rights for non-standard workers (contract and part-time workers);
 - the need for cultural change to eliminate gender bias and discrimination;
 - the privatization of and state investment in care-giving;
 - women's lack of property rights;
 - the need to strengthen regional cooperation for the implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action;
 - improved gender statistics;
 - women's participation in politics and decision-making; and
 - work-life balance

In addition to the above areas, they also highlighted emerging areas of concern including:

- climate change;
- disaster management;
- the feminization of ageing;
- new dimensions of migration

12. Following discussion of a conceptual framework and important thematic areas for the meeting, experts discussed how the meeting could be structured and its organizational logistics. In planning for the meeting, it was considered important to work with and build around the “government architectures” of the member States which would be attending the meeting. By considering the department within government most likely to be represented at the meeting, the scope of gender expertise and decision-making power of the representatives likely to be sent, and what is in the power of government representatives to do or to not do during inter-governmental meetings of this nature, the event could be planned in a way so as to ensure maximal impact.

13. There was general consensus that highlighting best practices and lessons learned should be a primary focus of the high-level meeting.

14. Experts also emphasized the importance of ensuring preparations for the high-level meeting were coordinated with, complemented and reinforced other preparatory processes, such as by other regional commissions and the regional non-governmental organization (NGO) and civil society preparations for Beijing +15. Experts emphasized the importance of ensuring that NGOs and civil society had a significant role at the meeting. The Asia Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15 was scheduled to take place in Manila from 22-24 October 2009, preceding the high-level meeting. The outcome of the NGO Forum could be presented to the high-level meeting. ESCAP will also consider how the Asia Pacific regional process could influence and be of benefit to other regional commissions.

15. Experts discussed the most appropriate outcome for the meeting, and sought to identify how the outcome could best feed into the Commission on the Status of Women which would take place in spring 2010. The previous “Beijing +10” process resulted in the issuing of the Bangkok Communiqué, an reaffirmation of member States of their commitment to the aims and objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. However the experts expressed general consensus for a more substantive and in-depth outcome document. The following are some of the suggestions made by experts on contents to be covered in the outcome document:

- Review of progress in critical areas focusing on accountability of governments to previous commitments made.
- Reaffirmation of governments to full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.
- Agreement from governments of integration of women’s empowerment and gender equality in national development plans and integrating into national plans for women’s equality and gender equality all of the key women’s developmental agendas (Beijing Platform for Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and MDGs).
- Agreement from governments to provide proper financing for their plans and programmes to advance gender equality.
- Ensure follow up of the Secretary General’s campaign “Unite to end violence against women” and other gender-related human rights treaties, conventions and special rapporteur initiatives.

16. The suggestion was also made that the “Beijing +15” review presented an opportunity to initiate a new regional cooperation mechanism for promoting gender equality, and that reference to such a new regional mechanism could be embedded within the outcome document.

17. The involvement of other United Nations entities in the planning and organization of the high-level meeting would also be crucial. In particular, various entities could play a role in funding and sponsoring side events, roundtables and panels for the high level meeting. The following topic areas were suggested by experts for the organization of panels, round tables and/or side events:

- Gender, climate change and environmental security
- Meso-level issues or institutional factors affecting gender equality in the region
- Work-life balance issues and responses
- Women and information and communication technologies (including the impact on women of ICT opportunities and innovations)
- How the Beijing Platform for Action can inform the MDG review process
- Translating law into reality (focusing on the example of violence against women)

18. It was also important that the research and findings of other entities be incorporated in the final recommendations of the high level meeting to be set forth in the outcome document

19. Parallelevents were also suggested to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the tenth anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325.

20. Additionally, the setting up of a radio booth and the screening of documentaries were suggested to highlight success stories during the high-level meeting.

III. PROCEEDINGS OF MEETING

Summary of Session 1: Overview of the Pacific

21. Ms. Treva Braun, Gender Equality Advisor of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), presented an overview on the Pacific island countries. She stated that the Pacific had one of the lowest levels of participation of women in parliament. On average, 3.8 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women but in some countries there are no women Parliamentarians. In order to improve the representation of women, measures such as the establishment of quotas were being proposed. In addition to the reservation of seats, there was a need to address cultural barriers that prevented women from participating in electoral and decision-making processes.

22. Violence against women remained an issue of serious concern in Pacific countries: however, efforts were being made by some countries to address the problem. Kiribati, Samoa and Solomon Island had conducted national surveys to measure violence against women using the World Health Organization methodology. Legislation was starting to be enacted in some countries; however, implementation remained weak and significant legislative reform was urgently needed.

23. In education, the enrolment of boys and girls in primary and secondary schools had achieved parity in most, but not all countries in the Pacific. However, at the tertiary level, significant gaps remained. The economic participation of women remained limited and was often confined to cash economies and to areas such as agriculture and handicrafts. The present financial and economic crisis had affected countries in the Pacific including where tourism was an important sector.

24. Commenting on future areas in need of attention, she specified the urgent need for institutional capacity-building of both national women’s machineries to enable them to play a more significant role in influencing policy, and of the whole of government to be more gender-responsive. Social

protection policies and systems such as employment, health and pension schemes need to be strengthened, in particular to reach non-public sector workers. Moreover, she pointed out that climate change was expected to have a direct and potentially severe impact on Pacific island countries, with unique and unaddressed risks for women.

25. Ms. Braun indicated that the SPC was doing work in several areas including (1) stock-taking of gender mainstreaming capacities of Governments; (2) promoting improved development partner co-operation; (3) strengthening the collection and use of gender indicators; and (4) assisting countries to conduct socio-cultural research into gender based violence.

26. Experts agreed that there were important sub-regional differences in the Asia-Pacific region, and that the specific characteristics of the Pacific island countries as a sub-region should be effectively addressed during the “Beijing +15” high-level meeting.

Summary of Session 2: Overview of Central Asia

27. Ms. Dono Abdurazakova, former Gender Adviser for UNDP Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, presented on the status of women in Central Asia. Gender disparities had grown as a result of the major changes the sub-region had undergone since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Women’s representation in political decision-making at all levels of central and local government had sharply declined, following the abolition in 1989 of the previous quota system which required 40 per cent women in locally elected bodies, and 30 per cent – at parliament level. In contrast, currently, there were on average 17 per cent women in parliament, thanks to the recent reintroduction of quotas. She emphasized, however, that while quotas were important, they needed to be supported by other measures addressing the systemic barriers to women.

28. She reported that economic security for women had declined. Women’s participation in labour force market remained relatively high, but professional segregation, both vertical and horizontal, remained significant, thus limiting opportunities and sustaining considerable wage gaps. Addressing economic vulnerabilities of women and improving their living standards, especially in rural areas, should target their strategic needs and improve the access to economic assets, especially for female single-parent headed households.

29. Women-entrepreneurs and women with small businesses also need support and access to capital and assets. While the promotion of women’s small-scale entrepreneurship and microcredit schemes could be an effective strategy for women’s empowerment, meeting experts expressed concern that the strategy was being used as a “panacea” for the promotion of gender equality. While microcredit could play a role in helping to advance women’s empowerment in the region, it was essential that governments remain committed to addressing underlying structural and macroeconomic barriers to gender equality.

30. Eliminating violence against women was a crucial issue in the sub-region. Advances had been made in some countries, such as Kyrgyzstan which introduced a law in 2003 to address domestic violence, created shelters for women and established a system of protection orders. However, the issue of violence against women still remained largely marginal.

31. Other areas that needed continuous attention were education and health. In some Central Asian states women outnumbered men in tertiary education, however, it did not translate into well-paid jobs and access to positions of power. Gender gaps in life expectancy reach almost 12 years in some Central Asian states, but although women live longer, their lives are “poorer”. An emerging issue of major concern in Central Asia was HIV and AIDS. While the global epidemic appears to have stabilized in other parts of the world, Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States were among the few regions where HIV infection rates were still rising, with particular impact on women.

32. The sharp increase in seasonal and more permanent labour migration from rural areas to wealthier neighbouring countries raises needed to take greater account gender dimensions of migration in Central Asia. Human trafficking was also an issue of particular concern. Ms. Abdurazakova stated that there had been a significant number of women, men and children involved in trafficking or who had been trafficked; however, since 2005 there had been notable progress in addressing trafficking in the region. Public officials' attitudes toward trafficking had evolved from treating the issue as "shameful" to awareness that it was a human rights issue. The majority of Central Asian states introduced, over last years, specific anti-human trafficking legislation, including Uzbekistan where such a law was approved in 2008 and an action plan had been adopted.

33. With regard to the girl child, an issue which had recently come into discourse was the recruitment of school-age girls and boys for the cotton harvest, with rural children and the girls being particularly disadvantaged. For example, they were usually the ones who were most like to lose the opportunity to go to school and to be particularly affected by the lack of sanitation and unhygienic conditions.

34. Since three states in Central Asia were energy-rich, issues of gender, energy and the environment, was an area requiring much greater attention and should be flagged as a priority area to governments. Another issue which required greater attention was water, irrigation and water governance.

35. Greater work was needed to improve gender statistics. Although many national statistical offices possessed sex-disaggregated data, it was often not disseminated to the public. The issue of sex-disaggregated data and who should generate it was also discussed. There was a need to build the capacity of national statistical offices. At the same time, it might be useful to examine how other stakeholders could play a potentially useful role in the generation of sex-disaggregated data. Capacity building and better linkages between national mechanisms and national statistical offices was needed to improve the availability and use of gender statistics in research, analysis and policy-making.

Session 3: Structural barriers, cultural constraints, meso traps and other challenges

36. Ms. Farida Shaheed, Deputy Director, Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts and Director, Research, Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, presented her paper on institutional mechanisms and power and decision-making. She underscored that the Beijing Platform for Action was an action plan and agenda for transformation, which was being displaced by the MDGs and other agendas with a service delivery approach and classical ideas about growth. She further remarked on the paucity of collated data and information on recent progress in implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

37. Ms. Shaheed called for attention to the cross-sectional nature of the 12 critical areas of concern, including how progress – or lack thereof – in one area impacts others. The 12 critical areas, as well as emerging areas, should be addressed together as an integrated agenda. She further noted the need to have clear definitions of gender equality and women's empowerment, observing that the latter term had become disassociated from power, as well as power structures and dynamics.

38. While progress had been made in the setting up and even upgrading of national women's machineries in the region, Ms. Shaheed cautioned that such progress may not be secure. The Beijing Platform for Action envisaged national women's machineries as "central policy-coordinating units inside governments" and presumed that they would have the full support of all other ministries. However, in reality it was often difficult for them to mobilize support. National women's machineries suffered from ill-defined mandates and inadequate financial and human resources. Moreover, bureaucracies were sector-specific and did not operate cross-sectorally, which was critical for gender work. There was a need to rethink national women's machineries as key champions sitting at every table. Additionally, Governments must develop one integrated national plan for gender equality and women's empowerment, which should be integrated into all national plans and budgetary processes.

39. She emphasized the need to develop agreed-upon operational definitions of “gender equality” and “gender mainstreaming” to facilitate tracking commitments on women’s empowerment, and the need to institute measures that make financial commitments visible and which track resources for gender equality. For instance, build on the United Nations Development Group’s “One Budget Framework” pilot for sex-disaggregated tracking of budgets, which suggests a Task Team review and build on existing systems, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee’s Gender Marker and the UNDP system for tracking revenue, allocations and expenditures for gender equality.*

40. Ms. Shaheed observed a presumption among policy planners of persons in set categories, e.g., students, farmers, etc., which failed to differentiate women’s and girls’ needs and those of other groups. Policies were expected to easily filter from the macro level down to the micro level, without consideration of the meso level (local policies and regulations; customary laws and practices; cultural beliefs; discourses and practices justified as traditions; organizational structures). She emphasized that family, community decision-makers, and others seriously impede progress and protection of rights for women on the basis of culture, tradition and religion. The more State institutions were removed from women’s lives, the more women would fall prey to such power structures.

41. In addressing the importance of sex-disaggregated data, Ms. Shaheed noted that such data was being collected and that many national statistical offices had received gender training. However, the information produced was often not accessible and may not be tabulated in meaningful ways. Apart from data, there was also a significant need for qualitative research, without which women’s lives would not be changed.

42. Ms. Shaheed stated that women’s access to – i.e., the number of women who are part of – the political process was important but insufficient for political empowerment. To this, the expert group added that political articulation was also key. Temporary special measures such as quotas could be an effective strategy, but must be employed with caution. For example, they may not bring in those women who could effect change. Ms. Shaheed pointed out that women were often less interested in politics than in the right to make decisions about their lives, for example, if and whom to marry and whether or not to have children; recalling that the critical area of concern “women in power and decision-making” should be examined more literally, rather than be limited to the realm of the political process.

43. Turning to the threat of political and religious forces outside the democratic framework, Ms. Shaheed emphasized the need to distinguish those which form part of the political process from those which opted out in order to use force. Religious forces were often in fact political ones. She noted that there had been significant reluctance to address this issue, which must not be approached in terms of culture and religion, but rather in terms of State citizens with rights.

44. Ms. Shaheed urged greater focus on women’s collective rights as well as processes for change, which required information, linkages and support. Collective rights and processes had worked effectively as a strategy to give land to landless women. She highlighted that women across the region sought “safe spaces” to be together, talk and develop their own strategies, and that these must be ensured. Women must also be able to claim their right to culture and to further decide which aspects of it they liked and disliked. With regard to influencing culture, working with youth, in particular young men, was essential.

45. A key emerging issue for the region was natural disasters, including their link to climate change and internally displaced populations. Whereas this was not a critical area of concern at the time the Platform for Action was adopted, Asia-Pacific had been at the centre of major natural disaster occurrence in recent years. Ms. Shaheed noted that although there was ample literature on the gender

* *Delivering as One on Gender – UN Retreat, Hanoi, November 2008*, PowerPoint presentation at CSW Meeting Tuesday 3 March 2009; slide 10.

dimensions of disaster impacts and recovery and reconstruction, the region had failed to institutionalize what had been learned and needed to implement standard operating procedures.

Session 4: Gender, water security and climate change

45. Ms. Sara Ahmed, former Chair, Gender and Water Alliance; Senior Programme Specialist, Rural Poverty and Environment, International Development Research Centre, presented an overview of the gendered dimensions of water security and climate change in the region. She emphasized the need to examine the impact of climate variability on “vulnerable people in vulnerable places”. Ms. Ahmed pointed out that while climate change was now recognized as a reality (by the International Panel on Climate Change at its meeting of 4 April 2007); the gender implications of climate change were still only minimally incorporated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Examining and incorporating gender perspectives required urgent attention, as it heavily impacted women. For example, if water should become scarce, girls would spend more time fetching it, negatively impacting their time for schooling. With decreased water supply, diseases would be more easily spread and caring for the ill was more often shouldered by women. Conflicts over water scarcity would compound existing social conflicts, leading to increased violence that would inevitably affect women. Despite these facts, the “right to water” was still not accepted as a fundamental human right.

46. Ms. Ahmed’s presentation highlighted the need for gender mainstreaming in natural resource management. However, Ms. Ahmed cautioned that while involving more women in the decision-making processes of natural resource management was critical, establishing quotas alone was not sufficient to bring about fundamental change in gender relationships. In this context, the group discussions concurred that working with men was critical.

47. Ms. Ahmed pointed out the urgent need to engender the Adaptation Fund to earmark 20 percent of the funds to women’s adaptation priorities and activities to empower women through community based change. In this context, she shared some of the innovative adaptation pilot projects in the region including (i) lobster fattening, which fetched good prices, through working in partnership with the private sector; (ii) growing indigenous crops that were nutritious and ecologically sustainable. The discussions also included the need to link North-South activism.

48. It was also felt that there was a need to work cross-sectorally and to look beyond the ‘water box’ and increase regional cooperation on trans-boundary water issues and governance in the Asian and Pacific region, like that built around the Rhine River in Europe. In order to influence policy, discussions during the session centred around how policy makers needed to base their decisions on solid and long term research. There was also a need to effectively communicate the results in order to influence policy.

Session 5: Information technology and media

49. Ms. Anita Gurumurthy of IT for Change presented an overview on the gender dimension of the information society, and how rapid developments in ICTs was making it necessary to recast how they were originally conceptualized in the Beijing Platform for Action. Society was experiencing major changes with its evolution toward an information society and information and communication technologies were no longer merely tools for disseminating and sharing information or for recreation and entertainment purposes. They were transforming the way the world operated in fundamental ways and becoming a central force in shaping the crucial power structures within and among countries; government, institutional, private sector and civil infrastructures and the linkages between them; and basic social, economic and political concepts and paradigms – for example, concepts of the public domain, citizenship and personal identity - which govern our society.

50. She pointed out that ICTs offered great potential for women's empowerment; yet, at the same time, in a society where such technologies were increasingly defining the terms under which our society operated, unless gender concerns were integrated into ICT policies and planning, women risked marginalization and exclusion. It was particularly important for women to be integrated into the increasingly ICT-dominated rapidly changing environment.

51. In the areas of governance, finance and the economy, trade, and health services, ICTs were quickly becoming the *modus apparatus* for operation. Those not integrated into the information society would quickly become marginalized from such processes. Governments were increasingly dispensing entitlements and information only through new technologies or doing so in such a way that those with no access to the required technologies were disadvantaged. Though not made explicit, this meant that in some cases, to have access to basic entitlements from their Government, citizens must be integrated in the information society. Those who were not part of the information society were in a position of disadvantage. Control and regulation of information flows was a crucial issue having an impact on the balance of power in society. The role of corporations in controlling information flows needed be examined. Gender concerns needed to be integrated into the planning all of these developing ICT-related areas.

52. Ms. Gurumurthy reported that among the positive applications of ICTs, the Internet enabled women from different areas and countries to connect. It gave women new freedoms and provided a space for women's self-expression and support networks. Through its promotion of citizen's media and peer-to-peer networks, ICTs had also played a strong role in energizing the women's movement by enabling women's organizations to more effectively mobilize resources and connect with other women's groups and facilitating coalition-building among women's groups. The Internet served as a vehicle for protest and radical action allowing feminist activities a space to express themselves and as a vehicle for women to integrate into global processes. Small scale women entrepreneurs, for example, could reach the global marketplace through the Internet. Women suffering injustices in oppressive regimes or facing heavy cultural and political constraints could express their voices through blogs and seek global support.

53. Ms. Bianca Miglioretto of ISIS International presented on the wide accessibility of traditional media among women in rural communities. A study recently conducted by People's Communication for Development (PC4D) in five countries involving interviews, data collection, research analysis, meta-analysis and focus group discussions found that traditional communication tools such as radio, theatre, film and face-to-face communication were still the most effective communication tools for grassroots women. Radio was the most accessible communication tool followed by film and mobile phone. Among ICTs, grassroots women had least access to computers and the Internet. At the grassroots level, Internet and computers were not found to be empowering for women. However, the Internet and computers were found empowering for intermediary groups in linking women to the world outside of the community at the national, regional and international level.

54. Experts iterated that the role ICTs were playing in creating new forms of exploitation of women was alarming. Information and Communications technologies were quickly becoming a platform for facilitating the use of pornography, prostitution, violence against women and the commodification of women through the proliferation of visual images disparaging to women. The role of such technologies in facilitating trafficking of women and the reinforcement of negative gender stereotypes was also evident. This was accelerated to a great extent by the unregulated environment of the Internet. There was urgent need for intervention and appropriate regulation to ensure an ICT environment which prevented further exploitation of women, created a safe public domain for women's participation, and promoted healthy images of women.

Summary of Session 6: Ageing

55. Ms. Evi Nurvidya Arifin, Visiting Research Fellow from the Institute of South East Asian Studies, presented an overview on gender and ageing. Due to increases in life-expectancy and falling fertility rates, the population was ageing in the Asia and Pacific region as well as globally. In

individual countries, the population was ageing at different speeds. In South East Asia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam were among the countries which had a significant proportion of older persons (60+) in the population. It was further pointed out that amongst the ageing population, both in old (60+) and oldest old (80+) categories, females were higher in number than men. It was highlighted that not only were women more in number, older women were also the poorest of the poor, suffered from several types of social deprivations and often had limited access to health care.

56. She also pointed out that women tended to be care-givers in society but they often did not have care takers to look after their needs. Further, it was shown that due to out-migration and other factors, traditional forms of family support for older persons was diminishing in the region and hence, there was a need for social protection measures to address the needs of the older population. Singapore was pointed out as a country which had a well functioning social insurance scheme for older segment of the population. She drew attention to the fact that social protection policy needed to take a life cycle approach and provide services such as pension schemes for the informal sector, training and education for older persons to enhance their employability and creating primary health care centres with staff trained in geriatric services. Given the relatively low levels of gross domestic product per capita and limited fiscal resources, concerns were raised regarding financing for social protection services for older women.

57. During the discussion, experts emphasized that while the feminization of ageing was a well-known phenomena, there was a need for Governments to develop more effective policy measures to assist older women especially because the traditional forms of care where children look after their ageing parents was fast disappearing in Asian societies.

Summary of Session 7: Family and work-life balance

58. Ms. Nobuko Nagase, Professor of Labour Economics and Social Policy, Ochanomizu University, Japan, presented a case study which highlighted key gender issues as it related to family and work-life balance in Japan today. She pointed out that the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law, which prohibited discrimination against women, still had not been translated into reality yet, despite two decades of efforts. For example, in research on office work, data indicated that women still mainly occupied jobs in *ippanshoku* (general secretarial jobs, with lower responsibilities and lower pay), as opposed to *sougoushoku* (professional jobs, with higher responsibilities and higher pay).

59. Ms. Nagase also pointed out that there was a marked gender difference in accessing and obtaining regular work with proper employee benefits. She showed indicators that in particular, less educated women and women wishing to return to the workforce after child birth faced difficulties in obtaining work. Ever since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998, the number of “non-standard” workers (contract and part-time workers with less job security) had dramatically risen. This phenomenon was expected to continue with the current global financial crisis unfolding in Japan. Currently, policies that encouraged work-life balance, such as child-care leave and the provision of child-care centres, tended to mainly only benefit employees with stable jobs, who were more likely to be men. In this context, Ms. Nagase urged that social security coverage must be extended to the rising number of “non-standard” workers to ensure that women who needed such benefits the most could be included. Ms. Nagase also highlighted a contradiction in Japan of the big gap that existed between the “ideal” and “reality” of work-life balance. For example, it was shown that men actually preferred to spend more time with their family and undertake child-care, while women preferred spending less time on child-care, and more time on paid work.

60. The discussions following the presentation focused on applying the lessons learned from the Japan case study to the Asian and the Pacific region. Participants agreed that the issue of work-life balance would increasingly become a regional concern, with more women participating in the labour-force, due to growing male income instability and the feminization of ageing. It was stressed that across the region, increased social security coverage was needed for ‘buffer employees’ who fell

through the cracks of formal social security coverage. It was also recognized that progressive legislation on its own was simply not enough to bring about real change, and that there was a need to re-examine socio-cultural practices in every day life. For example, the influence of Confucian philosophy on views of gender inequality remained strongly embedded in East Asian culture (Hong Kong, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, Province of China), despite progressive legislation aimed at improving gender equality.

61. In this context, it was agreed that the decision-making processes at the meso-level that linked the micro and macro levels, needed to be addressed in order for policy changes to take place on the ground. Participants stressed the need for the State to increasingly provide and fill in for the care-giving roles that women had traditionally undertaken to ensure that women were less burdened with household tasks, and that a more equitable division of labour of household and child-care responsibilities between men and women needed to be pursued.

Summary of Session 8: The economic crisis

62. Ms. Shamika Sirimanne, Chief of the Trade Facilitation Section, Trade and Investment Division, ESCAP, presented a paper on gender perspectives of the economic crisis. Noting that the Asia-Pacific is a trading region and affected by major trade partners such as the United States, she reviewed the origins of the present crisis. By late 2008 the United States housing crisis had turned into a global financial crisis. Capital was moving out of countries, property markets were falling, and finally, exports were hit. Whereas the region was able to “export out of” the Asian crisis of 1997, this time there was no export market.

63. The International Monetary Fund had estimated that the world economy will contract by 1.3 per cent in 2009. From an average growth rate of up to eight per cent in Asia-Pacific, the region was moving now to 3-5 per cent annual growth. Ms. Sirimanne emphasized that this drop was particularly dangerous for the region given the large numbers of people that had recently been lifted out of poverty.

64. Studies had shown that the poor were hardest hit in economic downturns, and also take much longer to recover. Poor households were pushed into a vicious cycle of poverty. They must employ coping strategies such as cutting down on meals, pulling children out of school and postponing healthcare, the impact of which women and girls were more vulnerable to due to household power structures. Ms. Sirimanne emphasized that these strategies could incur losses which could not be regained. In difficult times, families relied on women – who were the care providers – which meant a double workload for women.

65. Ms. Sirimanne noted that a disproportionate number of women were temporary, casual, seasonal and contract workers who were not covered by social protection measures. Women were also the first to be let go in downturns. Female dominated industries, such as clothing, footwear and electronics were experiencing rapid decline in exports. Other industries, such as tourism, were also significantly affected. However, the burden is not just on women, as male-dominated industries were suffering as well, particularly construction.

66. Ms. Sirimanne observed that the recent surge in staple food prices had largely been forgotten. Yet although prices had gone down, they were not at previous levels. Prices remained on average higher, at the same time as rising rates of unemployment. Additionally, it was underscored that, during crises, societies were in danger of collapse from civil and socio-economic turmoil. There was a greater incidence of crime, including violence against women as well as a higher number of suicides. In general, she had found that responses to the economic crisis in the region were “quick and huge”, and very pro-poor. There were large fiscal stimulus packages, containing inter alia specific measures to minimize unemployment, considerable social spending, support to low income countries and investment in rural development and health care.

67. Within government stimulus packages, Ms. Sirimanne had found no specific mention of gender. Most stimulus packages contain large public infrastructure works, and job creation in that area would mostly benefit men. She emphasized that there was a need to engender those packages. Whereas a consultation process existed when budgets go through the line ministries, there was no such process for fiscal stimulus packages, which were handled only by finance ministries. As a result, certain voices may not be heard. Women's groups needed to work with finance ministries, and to be able to talk to them on their level – in their “language”. These ministries generally considered gender as a social area only and not an economic one.

68. Ms. Sirimanne stated that at present there was a window of opportunity; however as fiscal space could evaporate, there was no room for complacency. If revenue started to plunge, spending would inevitably have to be cut. When Governments had limited fiscal space, they would always cut the least politically-resistant spending, such as in health and education. There must be close monitoring of – and strong arguments against – cutbacks in social spending, which had previously had enormous social costs.

69. She urged more emphasis on gender-responsive budgeting. There has been some progress in this area, but progress must be protected as well as enhanced. It was important to track public expenditure, which this region does not do. She underscored the importance of investment in agriculture. The agricultural sector employed a large number of women. ESCAP had found that 280 million people could be lifted out of poverty by improving the region's agricultural labour productivity. Additionally, microcredit must be protected as it was a lifeline for women and the poor. Banks had become very cautious in their lending; therefore, Government-owned commercial banks should be required to continue to promote microcredit which should be conditional if liquidity support was requested from central banks.

70. Ms. Sirimanne recalled that the ESCAP publication *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2007* raised the issue of the cost of gender discrimination in labour and education in the region which was estimated to be \$80 billion per year.

71. Following her presentation, some of the experts remarked that gender experts did not always have adequate expertise to communicate effectively with finance ministries. They noted a need for economists to provide guidance in this area and for more engagement across these fields of expertise. One expert stated that ESCAP could arrange for this type of capacity-building for civil society. Another expert acknowledged the usefulness of a finance-oriented vocabulary but advised that efficiency-based arguments must be accompanied by other arguments in line with the Beijing Platform for Action.

Annex

Expert Group Meeting in Preparation for the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

United Nations Conference Centre - Meeting Room D, Bangkok
13-15 May 2009

PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME[†]

Wednesday, 13 May 2009

Day 1: Overview and discussion of major issues relating to regional implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

08:30-09:00	Registration at United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC), ground floor
09:00-09:10	Opening Statement by Ms. Thelma Kay, Chief, Social Development Division, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)
09:10-09:30	Introduction of participants and meeting objectives
09:30-10:00	Introduction: Regional Overview Presentation by Ms. Beverly Jones, Officer-in-Charge, Gender Equality and Empowerment Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP
10:00-10:30	Coffee/Tea Break
10:30-11:15	Session 1: Overview of the Pacific Presentation by Ms. Treva D. (Téa) Braun, Gender Equality Adviser, Secretariat of the Pacific Community <i>Moderator: Ms. Beverly Jones, Officer-in-Charge, Gender Equality and Empowerment Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP</i>
11:15-12:00	Session 2: Overview of Central Asia Presentation by Ms. Dono Abdurazakova, Expert on gender issues in Central Asia <i>Moderator: Mr. Syed A.M. Nunuzzaman, Economic Affairs Officer, Special Unit on Countries with Special Needs, ESCAP</i>
12:00-13:30	Lunch Break
13:30-14:15	Session 3: Structural Barriers, Cultural Constraints, Meso Traps and Other Challenges Presentation by Ms. Farida Shaheed, Deputy Director of the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC); Director, Research, Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre <i>Moderator: Ms. Thelma Kay, Chief, Social Development Division, ESCAP</i>

[†] This programme is provisional and subject to change.

- 14:15-15:00 **Session 4: Gender, Water Security and Climate Change**
 Presentation by Ms. Sara Ahmed, Chair, Gender and Water Alliance; Senior Programme Specialist, Rural Poverty and Environment, International Development Research Center
Moderator: Ms. Salmah Zakaria, Economic Affairs Officer, Water Security Section, Environment and Development Division, ESCAP
- 15:00-16:00 **Session 5: Information Technology and Media**
 Presentation by Ms. Anita Gurumurthy, Executive Director, IT for Change
 Briefing by Ms. Bianca Miglioretto, Community Radio Officer - Isis International, on key findings of the People's Communication for Development (PC4D) research study
Moderator: Ms. Atsuko Okuda, Information Technology Officer, Information and Communications Technology and Disaster Risk Reduction Division, ESCAP
- 16:00-16:45 Discussion on key messages and recommendations from issues raised on Day 1

Thursday, 14 May 2009

- Day 2: Continuation of overview and discussion of major issues relating to regional implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action; feedback, input and ideas on the conceptual framework of the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting (HLM) in October 2009*
- 09:00-9:30 Brief review and summary of key elements stemming from Day 1 discussions
- 09:30-10:15 **Session 6: Ageing**
 Presentation by Ms. Evi Nurvidya Arifin, Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of South East Asian Studies
Moderator: Mr. Bhakta Gubhaju, Population Affairs Officer, Social Policy and Population Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP
- 10:15-11:00 **Session 7: Family and Work-Life Balance**
 Presentation by Ms. Nobuko Nagase, Professor of Labour Economics and Social Policy, Ochanomizu University
Moderator: Ms. Keiko Osaki-Tomita, Chief, Social Policy and Population Section, Social Development Division, ESCAP
- 11:00-11:45 **Session 8: The Economic Crisis**
 Presentation by Ms. Shamika Sirimanne, Chief, Trade Facilitation Section, Trade and Investment Division, ESCAP
Moderator: Ms. Thelma Kay, Chief, Social Development Division, ESCAP
- 11:45-13:00 Lunch
- 13:00-14:00 Discussion and consensus on key messages and recommendations from issues raised on Day 2
- 14:00-17:00 **Discussion on the Conceptual Framework of the HLM**
 Identify possible key substantive issues to be addressed and related documentation, with particular emphasis on moving forward

Friday, 15 May 2009

Day 3: Feedback, input and ideas on the structural framework of the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting (HLM); finalization of recommendations on (1) key messages; (2) emerging issues, persistent challenges and moving forward on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action; and (3) the conceptual and structural framework for the HLM

09:00- 9:15	Brief review and summary of possible key elements of the conceptual framework of the HLM as discussed on Day 2
09:15-11:00	Discussion on the Structural Framework of the HLM Discuss structural elements, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Structural format -Participation -Panel discussions, roundtables, etc. -Capacity building and/or training -Side events -Outcomes
11:00-12:00	Finalize inputs and suggestions for the conceptual <i>and</i> structural framework
12:00-13:15	Lunch Break
13:15-14:15	Adoption of Recommendations
14:15-14:30	Closing