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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Fifty-sixth session
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EMERGING ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL: SOCIO-ECONOMIC MEASURES TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS

(Item 7 (c) of the provisional agenda)

REPORT OF THE HIGH-LEVEL INTERGOVERNMENTAL MEETING TO REVIEW REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

SUMMARY

The High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, held at Bangkok from 26 to 29 October 1999 reviewed the progress made and the obstacles encountered in implementing the 12 critical areas of the Platform and reiterated the commitment of the region to the fundamental objectives and principles enshrined therein for achieving gender equality in society. It declared that the political and economic empowerment of women, following a rights-based approach and specific strategies, was the cornerstone for further improving the status of women.

The Meeting concluded that some progress had been achieved in the region, particularly in literacy, health, economic participation, amendments to discriminatory laws, decision-making at the local level and strengthening of gender focal points. However, women in poverty continued to suffer economic and social exclusion. The economic crisis, although it could be nearing its end, had affected the employment and social conditions of women. As the Asian and Pacific region entered the new millennium, globalization and integration had intensified. While that had expanded opportunities for women, it had also increased the vulnerability of women in Asia and the small island developing states in the region and it had exacerbated the inequalities between men and women. Moreover, trafficking in women and children still posed a grave threat and women continued to suffer from domestic violence and increasing insecurity owing to localized armed conflicts.

The Meeting made several recommendations to accelerate the implementation of the Platform. It urged the countries to take concerted measures to counter the effects of the slowdown in growth rates in many countries of the region, particularly the impact on female labour force participation, by providing alternative avenues of employment and income earning opportunities. It recommended that urgent measures should be adopted to protect the migrant workers in the region and to alleviate the economic plight of poor female-headed households. Those measures should include specialized training programmes and measures to support employment and small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Meeting stated that there was a need to create universal awareness of all human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social, including the right to development - and the fundamental freedoms of women and children, including the girl child, through comprehensive gender-sensitive human rights education and legal literacy programmes. In addition, constitutional provisions should be made on gender equality and the use of affirmative action policies. The Meeting recommended that to achieve universal ratification by the year 2000, countries should be encouraged to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Women's Convention). It urged countries to review and amend national laws, as appropriate, to ensure that they were in line with that Convention and other human rights treaties. It urged countries to consider the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention, keeping in view national needs, priorities, and other considerations.

The Meeting recommended that resources and support for innovative non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals engaged in women's empowerment activities in critical areas of concern should be explored. Partnership and cooperation should be further promoted between governments and NGOs, and international and regional organizations and NGOs in Asia and the Pacific established since Beijing. Furthermore, wider participation by NGOs in the "Beijing +5" process, in accordance with United Nations regulations and practices, was called for.

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I. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

A. Background

1. The High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok from 26 to 29 October 1999.

2. The Meeting was convened pursuant to a decision by the Commission at its fifty-fourth session, held in 1998, to review the regional implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, which had been adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in 1995. The Meeting also constituted the regional preparatory activity for the special session of the General Assembly entitled, "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century", to be held at New York in June 2000.

3. The Meeting was preceded by an expert group meeting held in April 1999, which set the framework of broad issues and concerns within which the 12 critical areas of concern, contained in the Platform would be evaluated.

4. Reports pertaining to the overall review of regional implementation of the Platform (agenda item 4) and the issues for consideration (agenda item 5) appear as the Chairperson's text annexed to the present report.

B. Attendance

5. The Meeting was attended by representatives of the following members and associate members of ESCAP: Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Fiji, France, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tonga, Tuvalu, the United States of America, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. Representatives of Cook Islands; Hong Kong, China; and Macau also attended the Meeting.

6. Representatives of Canada, Germany, the Holy See, Hungary and Israel attended the Meeting as observers.

7. The following United Nations bodies and programmes were represented: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Development Fund for Women, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations International Drug Control Programme, United Nations Population Fund and World Food Programme.

8. Representatives of the following specialized agencies were present: International Labour Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Health Organization and the World Bank.

9. The following intergovernmental organizations attended as observers: Asian Development Bank, Asian and Pacific Development Centre, Asian Productivity Organization, South Pacific Forum Secretariat, Canadian International Development Agency, International Organization for Migration and Mekong Region Law Center.

10. Observers were present from non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council as well as those accredited to the Fourth World Conference on Women.

C. Opening of the Meeting

11. In his statement, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP expressed his appreciation to Khunying Supatra Masdit, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office of the Government of Thailand for opening the Meeting. He noted that women had great potential to transform the social and economic landscape of the region. Even poor women had demonstrated their capacity to utilize productive resources. Women had made a significant contribution to the economic performance of the region and many of them had distinguished themselves in business, government, politics, the mass media and non-governmental organizations. The service sector and the rapid diffusion of new forms of technology, including information technology, had opened up vast opportunities for women.

12. The Executive Secretary expressed concern that, despite concerted efforts, women in general had continued to face formidable obstacles to improving their social and economic status. The situation of women living in poverty remained a cause for deep concern and the slowing down of economic growth rates in the region made it difficult to absorb women seeking employment in the formal sector. Other constraints faced by women included the denial of women's right to reproductive health, social barriers in obtaining a decent education, violence against women, trafficking in women and children and intra-state armed conflict with its devastating effect on family and community life. He reminded the Meeting that women constituted an incredible resource for any nation, and that many nations remained unnecessarily impoverished by neglecting that resource. He thanked the Government of Japan, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme for their financial support, and other organizations for their in-kind support in undertaking preparatory activities towards the organization of the Meeting.

13. A statement was then delivered on behalf of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, in which it was noted that the Platform for Action had refocused attention on the human rights of women, leading to a marked paradigm shift towards a rights-based approach to gender equality. In the five years since the Fourth World Conference on Women, great efforts had been made by governments, civil society and the entities of the United Nations system to implement the Platform for Action at national, regional and international levels. In that regard, the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 54/4 of 6 October 1999 on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was a clear indication of the commitment of governments to translate rights into reality. Similarly, the civil society continued to play a critical role in moving the Platform for Action forward, through energizing debates, monitoring the commitment of governments, and sustaining the spirit and deeds of the Platform for Action. The statement drew attention to two new challenges. First, it was vitally important to make gender equality an integral part of normative policy and operational efforts to ensure that the twin goals of economic growth and the expansion of human capabilities were attained. Second, the changing nature of conflict, where women and girls were increasingly becoming the targets, had to be taken into account in peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts.

14. On behalf of the Prime Minister of Thailand, His Excellency Mr Chuan Leekpai, the Minister to the Prime Minister's Office, Her Excellency Khunying Supatra Masdit extended a warm welcome to all those attending the Meeting. In delivering her opening address, she observed that, great strides had been made in the 15 years since Nairobi and the five years since Beijing, but the situation around the world had also changed dramatically. Globalization had become a reality which proved to be a "double-edged sword". It had led to greater integration, liberalization and interdependence of the world economy and had generated increased opportunities and access to employment and economic prosperity, contributing in turn to the promotion of human rights, social justice and gender equality. On the other hand, it had also had some negative impacts. Labour migration, especially the rising proportion of women migrant workers, had resulted in the expansion of organized crime and growth in the sex trade and transboundary trafficking, particularly of women and children. Environmental degradation and the spread of new diseases such as HIV/AIDS were also negative aspects of globalization.

15. The Minister to the Prime Minister's Office also noted some of the achievements made by Thailand since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, including clear provisions in Thailand's new constitution, adopted in 1997, to guarantee equality between women and men, the elimination of discrimination against women and the promotion of human rights. Overall, policy formulation in Thailand had integrated the essence of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and the Beijing Platform for Action into national plans for women with mechanisms for their translation into real action.

D. Election of officers

16. The Meeting elected HE Khunying Supatra Masdit (Thailand) as the Chairperson and decided to elect the following heads of delegation as Vice-Chairpersons: HE Ms Mu Sochua (Cambodia), HE Ms Lavinia Wainiqolo (Fiji), HE Ms Zahra Shojaie (Islamic Republic of Iran), HE Ms Aitkul Samakova (Kazakhstan), HE Ms Rosa Aknazarova (Kyrgyzstan), HE Ms Rashida Yoosuf (Maldives), HE Mrs Kamala Pant (Nepal), HE Ms Kang Gui-won (Republic of Korea), HE Ms Latofat Nasreddinava (Tajikistan), HE Ms Ha Thi Khiet (Viet Nam), and HE Ms Tupou Faireka (Cook Islands).

17. Ms Luagalau Foisa Eteuati Shon (Samoa) was elected Rapporteur.

18. The Meeting constituted a Drafting Committee with Ms Ruth Limjuco (Philippines) as the Chairperson.

E. Adoption of the agenda

19. The Meeting adopted the following agenda:

1. Opening of the Meeting.
2. Election of officers.
3. Adoption of the agenda.
4. Overall review of regional implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.
5. Issues for consideration:
   - (a) Economic empowerment of women;
   - (b) Rights-based approach to the empowerment of women;
   - (c) Political empowerment of women;
   - (d) Strategies for the empowerment of women:
     - (i) Capacity-building for gender mainstreaming;
     - (ii) Building partnerships;
     - (iii) Accountability, monitoring and evaluation.
6. Adoption of the report of the Meeting.

II. PREAMBLE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Preamble

20. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995, heralded the dawn of a new era in the quest for a just society based on gender equality, development and peace. It espoused a human rights-based approach to gender equality. The Beijing Platform for Action is an agenda for bringing together various stakeholders with the common objective of empowering women. It enshrines a concept of shared power and responsibility at home, in the workplace and in the wider community. Based on a life-cycle approach, all appropriate public and private actions should be taken to protect the rights and to meet the needs of women in an integrated manner.

21. Since 1995, the countries of the region have used the Platform for Action to guide national action and regional and international cooperation in empowering women in the social, economic and political fields. It has served as a useful instrument for measuring progress, identifying gaps and galvanizing national, regional and international action to achieve gender equality and shared partnership between men and women. Measured against the benchmarks and the objectives set in the Platform for Action, some progress has been achieved by the region for the realization of women's human rights in all aspects of life and for their economic and political empowerment.

22. Yet new obstacles and challenges have emerged. Some countries in the region have been adversely affected by the financial and economic crisis. Others are adversely affected by their lack of self-determination. As the Asian and Pacific region enters the new millennium, globalization and integration have intensified. While this has had the positive impact of expanding opportunities for women, it has also had the negative impact of increasing the vulnerability of women in Asia and small island developing states in the region and exacerbating the inequalities between men and women. The meaning of work is changing as new and emerging technologies, especially information technologies, increasingly shape economic structures with a profound impact, both negative and positive, on women's lives. Thus, the political/economic empowerment of women, following a rights-based approach and specific strategies, offers a cornerstone for further improving the status of women.

23. In the midst of these unprecedented and rapid changes, the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action has acquired a new urgency. We, the participants of the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, recognizing the existing obstacles to advancing the status and empowerment of women, have come here to share and develop strategies for overcoming obstacles at the national and international levels. We reaffirm our commitment to implementation of the Platform for Action. We are convinced that with our joint efforts we will fulfil our vision of gender equality, development and peace in the twenty-first century.

B. Recommendations

24. In the course of the discussions, governments and other actors identified the following strategies and recommendations, including affirmative action, where appropriate, to further implement the Beijing Platform for Action:

(1) Concerted steps should be taken to counter the effects of the slowdown in growth rates in many countries of the region, particularly its impact on female labour force participation, by providing alternative avenues of employment and income earning opportunities. These opportunities should include small enterprise development, new skills training schemes to upgrade women's productivity and employability, and access to credit.

(2) An integrated approach is needed for removing the structural and policy impediments faced by women in the region. In addition to reforms and sectoral projects and programmes at the micro level, measures and initiatives should be supported by macro processes which aim at improving and sustaining the total productivity of the society as a whole, including that of women.

(3) Urgent measures are needed to protect migrant workers in the region, including measures to safeguard equal wages for equal work, guarantees against unfair dismissal, safe and better working conditions etc. The financial and economic crisis in the region has added to the vulnerability of female migrant workers who could face repatriation and loss of income/earning opportunities.

(4) Effective measures should be adopted to alleviate the economic plight of poor female-headed households which have been adversely affected by the economic crisis. These measures should include specialized training programmes and appropriate measures to support employment and the small and medium-sized enterprises of women from these households.

(5) Gender analysis of men's and women's paid and unpaid economic activity, including through periodic time-use surveys, should be carried out and to achieve better harmonization of family responsibilities. The value of unpaid work should be reflected in official accounts.

(6) Existing measures should be strengthened and new ones introduced to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural and urban areas, both in the formal and informal sectors. Measures should also be taken to ensure that home-based women workers receive fair remuneration for their work. Appropriate strategies should be developed for the well-being of low-wage workers with special focus on industries in which women are predominantly found, including the enforcement of domestic labour laws in export-processing zones. Adoption of training and retraining schemes can be effective in raising the productivity and remuneration of low-wage workers. For rural women engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishery, pay commensurate with labour should be promoted by clarifying the roles of women in such activities.

(7) Adequate basic needs and food security should be provided to women, particularly during periods of reduction in household access to food and other basic needs arising out of business setbacks, as well as sudden loss of employment by its members, such as during the economic crisis that began in 1997. Measures should be taken to facilitate financial institutions and other credit organizations to provide microcredit to women with no collateral, where appropriate. Particular attention should also be given to special women, like refugee women, other displaced women and internally displaced women, including women in situations of armed conflict.

(8) Women's full and equal access to productive resources, and local and indigenous knowledge should be promoted, including the right to inheritance, and the right to own and transfer land, credit, technology and natural resources.

(9) Governments, where appropriate, should consider ratifying the conventions of the International Labour Organization to guarantee equal pay for work of equal value and against discrimination based on sex in the labour market.

(10) The special situation and conditions of elderly women, women with disabilities, indigenous women and other marginalized women, including refugee women, women in situations of armed conflict and other displaced women, internally displaced women, women living under foreign occupation, women living in colonies and non-self governing territories, women migrant workers should be addressed within the framework of human rights policy, law and practice.

(11) Universal awareness by all persons, women and men, girls and boys, of all human rights -- civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, including the right to development -- and the fundamental freedoms of women and children, including the girl-child, should be promoted through comprehensive gender-sensitive human rights education and legal literacy programmes.

(12) It is essential that a rights-based approach to women's health be included in all health policies and programmes and that the current focus on reproductive health be expanded to the provision of comprehensive services which take into account cultural diversity and moral conviction and which are accessible and affordable to women of all ages, including marginalized groups.

(13) Constitutional provisions on gender equality and the use of affirmative action policies, where appropriate, as an intrinsic dimension of realizing equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex should be considered.

(14) With regard to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Women's Convention):

(a) Countries should be encouraged to ratify the Convention so as to achieve universal ratification by 2000.

(b) Countries with reservations may wish to consider withdrawing or limiting the extent of their reservations.

(c) National laws should be reviewed and amended, as appropriate, to ensure that they are in line with the provisions set forth in the Convention and other human rights treaties.

(d) Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention should be considered keeping in view national needs, priorities and other considerations.

(e) Countries may wish to consider integrating the concluding observations on the country reports by the United Nations Committee on the Convention, as appropriate, into policy planning.

(f) In order to ensure the effective implementation of the Convention and other human rights treaties, legal literacy and gender-sensitive human rights education should be conducted by relevant human rights authorities and institutions. Non-governmental organizations should be encouraged to participate in the reporting process to treaty bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

(g) Support given to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women should be enhanced to assist them in carrying out the capacity-building programmes of member countries in implementing the Convention.

(15) Consideration should be given to promoting the ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, particularly among countries of origin, transit and receiving countries.

(16) Appropriate policies and programmes should urgently be developed, in partnership across civil society, to protect all women and girls, including women in situations of armed conflict, indigenous women, older women, immigrants, refugees and women migrant workers and other displaced and vulnerable women and girls in need of protection from violence including rape, sexual assault, domestic and family violence, sexual slavery and forced prostitution.

(17) Policies and programmes to address violence against women should adopt an integrated, holistic and preventative approach and ensure support for victims of violence, including through public education; a comprehensive legislative framework; adequate social, psychological, medical and legal services and infrastructure; measures to prevent violence and sexual harassment in the workplace and other places; data collection on the incidence and types of violence; and the provision of gender-sensitive training for actors dealing with all aspects of victims' needs.

(18) The United Nations system, particularly the Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women and UNIFEM should be encouraged to strengthen the knowledge base on effective strategies to eliminate violence against women for countries to draw on.

(19) Consideration should be given to organizing an information and educational campaign on

the risks and damages of irregular migration and trafficking.

(20) Comprehensive human rights-based strategies should be developed and implemented to tackle trafficking in persons, especially women and children, for the purposes of slavery or slavery-like practices, forced labour or services by addressing prevention, protection and redress for trafficked persons and prosecution of traffickers in accordance with the law.

(21) Efforts, including ongoing efforts, on bilateral, subregional, regional and international agreements and treaties to combat all forms of trafficking in women and girls should be promoted. Provision of comprehensive assistance to victims of violence and trafficking should be promoted.

(22) A climate of regional cooperation and peaceful coexistence should be encouraged as part of the promotion of a culture of peace. Governments are encouraged to work actively towards general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.

(23) The right of self-determination of all peoples as enunciated in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action should be considered, and where appropriate, accelerated.

(24) Where appropriate, consideration should be given to the ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

(25) Full recognition of the girl child's rights as a child, which should not be overshadowed by casting the girl child as tomorrow's woman, should be ensured and measures to ensure girls' development at different stages of life, including, importantly, early childhood and adolescence should be promoted.

(26) Basic education for girls should be achieved as soon as possible to ensure that the benefits of education accrue, in a sustainable way, to girls.

(27) Greater gender parity at higher levels of education in response to the uneven and limited access of girls to higher levels of education should be fostered, where necessary.

(28) Affirmative action, where appropriate, should be supported with a view to ensuring equal opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes, including in parliamentary and other elected assemblies, political parties and the public sector.

(29) Appointment and nomination processes should be examined and reviewed with a gender perspective to eliminate discrimination, encourage participation and promote the advancement of women at all levels of decision-making.

(30) Gender-sensitive education should be emphasized and promoted in the school system at all levels and in lifelong learning programmes. Gender-sensitivity training should be provided to all stakeholders who are involved in policy, planning and implementing such policies and programmes.

(31) Leadership training should be provided for women at all levels of society to create an environment conducive to their enhanced participation in leadership roles.

(32) Electoral systems should be examined and promoted to ensure more opportunities for the

full participation and representation of women in politics.

(33) Research, studies and collection of sex-disaggregated statistics on women's participation in and impact on decision-making should be supported for the empowerment of women.

(34) Women's leadership and participation in all areas should be encouraged, including peace and preventative diplomacy and conflict resolution, as well as in situations of displacement following armed conflict and in the field of the environment. The role of women should be promoted in the celebration of the year 2001 designated by the General Assembly as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations to make and extend a culture of dialogue, peace and tolerance among different peoples from different civilizations.

(35) Policies and procedures should be reviewed with a view to ending those that discriminate directly or indirectly against women's access to senior positions.

(36) Measures should be adopted to expand the monitoring and accountability of the private sector, trade unions and civil society with a view to determining whether women in these institutions have access to leadership roles and to promote the contribution of women in the economy by addressing the obstacles to women's access to training, technology, credit, resources, markets and information.

(37) Efforts should be supported to organize formal and informal mentoring schemes for women's full and equal participation in politics.

(38) Integrated gender management systems and their advocacy should be developed into policy, planning, programming and budgeting at the local and national levels and appropriate reforms undertaken and resource allocations provided from international bodies.

(39) The distinction between mainstreaming gender perspective and mainstreaming women should be noted. Mainstreaming gender perspective emphasizes gender analysis in planning, policies, programming and capacity-building actions; mainstreaming women means the achievement of the empowerment of women and one of its goals is balancing gender representation between women and men in all fields and at all levels. Capacity-building in all fields and at all levels for national machinery for the advancement of women should include these distinctions. National machinery can be strengthened through involving South-South cooperation and bilateral collaboration.

(40) Training of personnel, in particular in the public sector, in the curricula of higher education institutions, the training of men in gender analysis, and media campaigns as part of increased awareness-raising on gender inequality should be expanded.

(41) Monitoring and evaluation beyond government accountability to other actors, for example,

civil society, the private sector, trade unions, the United Nations, multilateral and bilateral organizations, should be promoted.

(42) Effective mechanisms to enable the monitoring of the implementation of obligations of treaties by States Parties and of the Beijing Platform for Action, involving non-governmental organizations, should be identified or established and encouraged.

(43) Gender-sensitive indicators that encapsulate women's advancement in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, for example, enabling indicators, performance indicators, progress indicators, and psychological indicators should be identified.

(44) Representation of women in governmental bodies at national, provincial and local levels, as well as in international organizations, in particular the United Nations, in decision-making and in active roles, including delegations, missions, and other national and international forums should be encouraged.

(45) Resources and support for innovative non-governmental organizations and individuals engaged in women's empowerment activities in critical areas of concern apart from welfare services, income-generating or credit projects for women should be explored.

(46) Partnership and cooperation between governments and non-governmental organizations, and international and regional organizations and non-governmental organizations in the Asian and Pacific region established since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in 1995 should be further promoted.

(47) Partnerships and cooperation between governments and non-governmental organizations since the Fourth World Conference on Women at national, regional and international levels should be enhanced, particularly between ESCAP and Asian and Pacific non-governmental organizations and subregional groupings.

(48) The preparatory committee for the special session of the General Assembly on women, to be held in June 2000, is urged to promote wider participation of non-governmental organizations in the "Beijing +5" process in accordance with United Nations regulations and practices such as the accreditation process of non-governmental organizations for the Social Summit +5.

(49) The United Nations should take the steps necessary to promote wider participation of Member States, especially developing countries, in the "Beijing +5" process.

III. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

25. The Meeting adopted the report on 29 October 1999 and directed the secretariat to transmit the report to the Commission on the Status of Women as the input from the Asian and Pacific region for the forthcoming special session of the United Nations General Assembly, entitled

"Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century", to be held at New York in June 2000.

Annex

CHAIRPERSON'S TEXT

I. OVERALL REVIEW OF REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

(Agenda item 4)

1. The Meeting had before it document SD/BPA/1, "Overall review of regional implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action", prepared by the secretariat. The Meeting made the following observations.

2. Since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, almost all the countries in the region had introduced programmes to alleviate poverty. Income generation schemes centring around micro credit, public works programmes (for example, food for work), technological upgrading, skills development programmes and the institution of some form of social safety net featured prominently in government attempts to alleviate the situation of women in poverty.

3. Poverty affected different members of a household differently. Poor women, particularly those in female-headed households, tended to bear the main burden of poverty. Inequalities also existed across gender in the distribution of productive resources and access to economic opportunities. In poor households, men and women experienced poverty differently.

4. Although the region as a whole had been able to alleviate the worst forms of poverty, it was still home to the largest number of the poor in the world with many countries facing severe financial, technical and human resource constraints in alleviating poverty. It was a matter of concern that, in many countries, poor women were living in a situation of extreme deprivation and were highly vulnerable to internal as well as external shocks. Poverty in several countries of the region had deteriorated owing to the recent economic turmoil and many women in the affected countries had been forced to resume their traditional role in the unpaid and largely invisible household economy.

5. Governments and non-governmental organizations in many countries of the region had used savings and micro-credit mechanisms, programmes and schemes as an effective means of social mobilization towards the creation of income-earning opportunities for women and to broaden women's economic participation. Micro-credit programmes had also been used to deliver other support services, such as health facilities, education, skills training and technology upgrading.

6. Several developed countries of the region had adopted measures to provide low-income families and minority groups with support in augmenting their income and improving their welfare. Those measures had included provisions in their national budget for child-care facilities, income supplements and skills development programmes.

7. A wide range of policy initiatives and strategies had been adopted in the region, resulting in significant progress in promoting women's education and training. Most of those initiatives were focused on legal reforms to make primary education compulsory; the establishment of special bodies to monitor compliance with policy directives; the establishment of special commissions and committees, grants and scholarships for girl students; and the creation of public awareness. As a consequence, gender gaps in education in several countries of the region had been reduced and very high rates of female adult literacy had been achieved. However, some least developed countries and developing countries still had very low female literacy rates and faced severe constraints in mobilizing sufficient resources for investing in female literacy programmes.

8. It was a matter of concern that women in many developing countries continued to face difficulties in utilizing educational and training opportunities. In many instances, women fared less favourably compared with men in terms of accessing those opportunities owing to obstacles such as parental perceptions and society's attitudes towards women's education. External shocks and economic crises compounded those difficulties and had a discouraging effect on women's education. Island countries faced special difficulties as parents were reluctant to send their daughters to other islands for education. Gender stereotypes in several fields, including in the technical and professional fields, still hampered women's access to education and training opportunities.

9. Eradication of illiteracy continued to remain a priority area of concern in the context of the Beijing Platform for Action. Since 1995, most countries of the region had introduced new policy initiatives with the eradication of illiteracy as their primary objective. Equal access to educational opportunities such as continuing education and adult and functional literacy programmes helped in reducing female illiteracy rates. Many countries had experimented with new approaches to the eradication of female illiteracy, and more flexible and diversified forms of education, such as half-day primary schools, part-time primary schools and girl's primary schools, had been established in poverty-stricken areas.

10. Access to vocational training and opportunities to study subjects in science and technology, especially at the higher level, remained a precondition for women to acquire new skills and secure entry into higher levels of responsibility in business, academia, professional bodies and public offices. Several countries had introduced vocational training programmes to impart new and emerging skills to women and lifelong training for girls and women so that their skills and experiences remained valid in a fast changing environment. In addition, motivational and counselling programmes to encourage girls to choose careers in the fields of science and technology had been undertaken. But women continued to face difficulties in gaining entry into those fields owing to a variety of factors, including gender stereotyping.

11. Most countries in the region had made concerted efforts to provide their people with health care facilities by allocating increased resources to the health sector and instituting policy reforms and initiatives. Several countries reported new initiatives focusing on preventive health care. In many countries, governments had forged close partnerships with non-governmental organizations in delivering basic health care services to women and children and had succeeded in developing broad-based health care facilities, in both the rural and the urban sectors. However, the Meeting noted with concern a variety of factors that continued to impede the achievement by women of the right to general health and reproductive services. Gender combined with geographical location, social class and ethnicity were powerful barriers. Lack of control in the area of sexual and reproductive health prevented many women from improving their status and exercising autonomy in their personal lives. Limited access to reliable information on family planning services and to other services necessary for full reproductive health also acted as powerful barrier.

12. Most countries had adopted the objective of "health-for-all" and used primary health care, preventive approaches and new and innovative approaches to achieve that objective. Programmes had been introduced to create awareness about the importance of breastfeeding; the malnutrition and deficiency diseases of adolescents, and of pregnant and lactating women; the need to reduce fertility rates; and relationship between smoking and respiratory infections. Several countries had also launched education and information campaigns on HIV and AIDS. Special efforts had been made to ensure primary health care for all, with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups such as poor women and children. Measures had also been adopted to provide antenatal care, domiciliary delivery, postnatal care, child health care, pre-school and school health services, family planning, health education, nutrition activities (including nutrition education and nutrition surveillance) where these had not previously existed.

13. Visible progress had been made in improving female life expectancy and reducing maternal mortality rates in several countries of the region. However, the situation in several other countries of the region, including some least developed countries, Pacific island countries and the economies in transition, was far from satisfactory. A combination of poor health conditions during deliveries and resort to traditional methods, particularly in the rural areas, accounted for the high maternal mortality rates in those countries. Lack of information on available facilities and low purchasing power also contributed to maternal mortality.

14. A number of countries have paid increased attention to the issue of violence against women in all its forms. Measures adopted included the establishment of a national commission for the elimination of violence against women, enactment of new constitutional provisions, and development of a national plan of action advocating a policy of "zero-tolerance" where the issue of victims of violence and armed conflict had emerged as a critical concern. Campaigns on the elimination of violence against women as

part of public awareness-raising and education had also been initiated. Government actions to combat violence against women had involved working in cooperation and in partnership with the business sector and the community at large.

15. In the area of violence in the family, some developed as well as developing countries, had expanded their activities with governments playing a strong leadership role in the formulation of policies for the prevention of domestic violence. Specific laws on domestic violence had been enacted in several countries to provide protection of women and offer legal remedies. Some countries had taken action to create a more supportive environment for women victims and to make investigative procedures more women-friendly. Women police desks had been created and gender sensitization training had been initiated for law enforcers and other key actors. Support services had been strengthened, in the areas of medical and counselling support, legal aid and financial and housing assistance, including increasing the number of shelters and homes. It was, however, noted that in some countries progress was slow, given the social stigma attached to victims which affected the reporting of family violence. In some instances, it was believed that violence in the home was a private affair. This belief, however, was gradually changing.

16. Rape and sexual violence against women in the community was being addressed through legal reforms that would increase penalties for sexual violence. In some countries, recent amendments to penal laws had included provision for compensation to the victims of violence.

17. Sexual harassment in the workplace was receiving increased attention. Sexual harassment was covered in penal laws or in employment legislation. Codes of practice on prevention and eradication of sexual harassment at work had been formulated and were being implemented. In some subregions, trafficking in women and girls was problem of mounting concern which required expanded and strengthened interventions.

18. Many countries reported gains in women's employment, wages and access to non-traditional avenues of economic participation since 1995. In the Asian and Pacific region women's participation in economic activities had been increasing. This was reflected in their participation in and contribution to export-oriented industries. In several countries of the region, women had emerged as an important source of entrepreneurship and managerial capability in small businesses.

19. It was a matter of concern that the recent economic crisis had been detrimental to women's participation in the economy, particularly in the affected countries. Several countries had taken special measures to assist women facing difficulties in the wake of the crisis. Among such measures were the provision of vocational training and livelihood assistance for unemployed female heads of households.

20. It was a matter of deep concern that discriminatory practices, where those existed, continued in hiring, wages, promotion, access to training opportunities and occupational mobility. Such

discrimination went against the spirit of the Beijing Platform for Action. Moreover, women working in the informal sector seldom enjoyed any social protection against economic hardship. In some countries, women workers were the first to lose their jobs when enterprises faced economic difficulties. That had become most evident during the recent economic crisis which saw a disproportionate number of women being laid off simply because of their gender. There had been several best practices adopted to discourage and overcome discriminatory practices in the labour market, including measures to assist employers put up non-discriminatory job advertisements, prohibition of sexual harassment to protect female employees and revision of equal employment opportunity law to remove restrictions on overtime work, holiday work and night work by women. Measures had also been taken to provide the legal basis for reforming the institutional and financial systems to promote women's economic participation. Basic laws for gender equality had been established, setting out the fundamental principles with regard to the formation of a gender-equal society.

21. In the ESCAP region in general, the overall annual average growth rate of the female labour force had been increasing until 1997 when it began to slow down, largely reflecting the impact of the economic difficulties that had set in since mid-1997. Several of the most dynamic developing countries of the region had registered some of the largest declines. While in 1990-1995 gender gaps appeared to be narrowing in some countries, the ratios of wages received by females to those received by males had fallen significantly below the male average in several countries of the region.

22. The Beijing Platform for Action had put strong emphasis on the need to promote women's skills and access to markets, information and technology to enhance their participation in the economy. Several countries of the region had introduced new skills development programmes and strengthened other mechanisms to promote women's access to markets, information and technology. Vocational training programmes had been strengthened to improve the professional skills of women.

23. Several countries had introduced measures to ascertain objectively the conditions of women in unpaid work, including studies and research on policies to promote a quantitative understanding of women's unpaid work. Other measures had included comprehensive time-use surveys on different population groups with a view to identifying differences in the amounts of time that specific population groups spent on various activities.

24. While women continued to be in the minority in the area of power and decision-making, since Beijing the presence of women in positions of leadership had slowly but steadily increased in the sphere of politics in a number of countries. Some countries reported that women's leadership had increased at the national assembly, senate and cabinet levels. In some economies in transition, the number of women representatives at senior decision-making level remained low in the national parliament and the government. One country reported a drop in the number of women elected to legislative bodies, even though their educational and professional backgrounds were more impressive than those of the male counterparts.

25. The adoption of affirmative action policies which reserved quotas for women in politics could bring result in the increased representation and participation of women in grass-roots democratic institutions. In some countries, the reservation of one-third of local village and municipal body seats for women had resulted in a "quiet revolution" as women had significantly increased their participation in grass-roots democratic institutions. In other countries, organic laws on the operations of governance at different levels (e.g. provincial, local) had been provided to ensure equitable representation at various levels of government.

26. In public service, there had been a visible increase in women's access to the decision-making process. The decentralization of administrative power as well as policies to provide women equal access to and opportunity in local administrative positions had facilitated that process.

27. More needed to be done in private sector businesses to take advantage of the investment in women's education and training to promote women affirmatively to positions of leadership. Although institutional practices and barriers were slow to change, some developed countries reported government initiatives in partnership with the private sector to train women for assuming responsible positions in the boardrooms through mentoring and training activities.

28. At the institutional level, governments had demonstrated their political will through (a) the adoption of national plans of action by over two thirds of the countries in the region, incorporating all or most of the 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action; and the establishment of implementation structures such as national coordinating committees, however, in some countries, national action plans had not been translated into action or incorporated in national development plans; and (b) the strengthening of national institutional mechanisms, as evidenced by the upgrading the location within the government structure of over one third of the national focal points; nearly 20 countries had supplemented those subnational units at the provincial, district or even village level, and had linkages with focal points among other ministries. However, some national machineries in several developing countries appeared to be marginalized in the national planning and policy-making process and were often under-resourced.

29. Despite the repeated emphases on the necessity for balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media, images of women as inferior beings or, worse, as sexual objects and commodities, were still prevalent. Such portrayals caused continuous reinforcement of the stereotypical and traditional roles of women.

30. To eliminate such traditional gender biases and derogatory representations of women in the media, gender sensitive programming needed to be promoted. Some countries encouraged media professionals to take up the challenge to break the moulds and show women as individual human beings with a sense of dignity. Media strategies to build a positive image of women and eliminate their negative portrayal had been observed, such as sensitizing the media and barring the circulation of obscene

publications. The Meeting was pleased to learn that the number of women journalists reporting news had increased and the quality of their work had been commended. However, freedom of the mass media was important to build a democratic society. Constructive changes should come from the media professionals. For that goal and beyond, it was considered essential to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and the new communication technologies. There was a need for creating an environment to train women in and enable them to make full use of information technology.

31. Among all the areas concerning the girl child, notable development had been seen in education. Most countries reported that they had attained equal enrolment among boys and girls at primary school level and had seen improvements at secondary and tertiary levels. A few countries reported that female students outnumbered male students in non-traditional subject areas and post-secondary level education, although girls in several countries were still disadvantaged at the higher education level. That was often due to negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls. Girls continued to be underrepresented in non-traditional areas such as science and technology. To overcome that disparity, some countries had initiated awareness and counselling programmes to encourage girls to choose careers in those non-traditional fields.

32. In combating violence against the girl child, several countries had adopted various programmes to offer scholarships and provide free education as preventive measures against the trafficking and exploitation of children. Some countries had established legal and institutional mechanisms to safeguard children against all forms of violence.

33. In a joint statement delivered on behalf of several delegations from the Pacific subregion, grave concern was expressed regarding the specific challenges to peace and livelihood faced in the Pacific. Those challenges ranged from intellectual property rights to traditional medicines and natural flora and fauna from large pharmaceutical corporations, the trans-boundary movement of hazardous waste, increasing nuclearization and militarization and decolonization. As a bloc of countries, and supported by one associate member, the Meeting was called upon to address those issues and support action to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Convention on Biological Diversity, and implement the comprehensive plans in the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and to support the right to self-determination of colonized states.

II. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Agenda item 5(a): Economic empowerment of women

34. Women's economic empowerment involved the provision of a reasonable degree of financial autonomy and independence, and participation in economic decision-making with regard to matters

ranging from macro policies and programmes to household-level disbursements or disposition of income and resources. It also rested on the recognition and valuation of women's unpaid work which maintained and supported the family and society. Women's economic empowerment also involved security of employment, working environments that were safe from physical health hazards as well as sexual harassment, and work contracts that were drawn in accordance with international labour standards. Freedom from fear of traffickers of women (and not rewarding those involved in trafficking in any capacity), and the spectre of child labour, particularly of girls, constituted fundamental elements of women's economic empowerment. Additionally, access to and control over resources, including skills that would allow and enable women to engage in various economic enterprises, particularly in high value, high return activities, was vitally important. To preserve gains and to minimize losses, it was essential to be vigilant in anticipating the impact of macroeconomic processes and development programmes on women, by monitoring their effects and mobilizing to lobby against those economic processes and programmes that could most negatively affect women and girls.

35. The women's movement at the national and international levels, would have to address the problem created by some macroeconomic policies that tended to undermine efforts to improve the economic condition of women through specific legislation and directed schemes. In that context, the greater mobility of capital and the emphasis on external competitiveness had significantly reduced the bargaining power of women along with all other workers and had constrained the ability of social movements to influence public policies.

36. It had even been found that social action to improve the conditions of women workers (such as in exporting industries) tended to reduce the employment of women by private employers. In situations of adjustment, such as induced recession, women had disproportionately lost paid employment or had been forced into more precarious and poorly paid work. They had faced worsening living conditions due to diminishing productive employment opportunities, as well as falling food security and reduced access to public goods and services.

37. Globalization and increased interdependence had begun to have a decisive impact on the economic relationship between countries of the region. Globalization had brought significant opportunities as well as difficult challenges. Access to external resources, trade opportunities and new forms of technology had contributed significantly to the economic growth in the region, bringing expanded opportunities for women's economic and social advancement. Globalization had also made the countries of the region more vulnerable to external shocks. Disadvantaged groups such as women faced greater insecurity in the employment market. It was therefore essential to "unbundle" the process and consequences of globalization so that its beneficial effects could be maximized and adverse ones eliminated or managed.

38. The recent economic crisis in the region was partly a result of the globalization process. While some specific factors had been identified in explaining the origins of the crisis, its effect had been uniformly bad for women, a disproportionate number of whom faced sudden loss of employment and had to fall back on the informal and the agricultural sectors for economic survival. Migrant workers, many of them women, had to return to their home countries and face an uncertain economic future.

Agenda item 5(b): Rights-based approach to the empowerment of women

39. The World Conferences in Nairobi and Beijing, and the ratification of the Women's Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child by countries in the region had created a general environment that was supportive of women's rights as human rights. In the last four years, there had been increasing awareness in the international community and in the region that a human rights perspective could be integrated into several areas of the Platform for Action such as education, health (including reproductive health) and violence against women. While there had been limitations in the region in terms of ratification of the Women's Convention and the high number of reservations entered against it, as well as in progress achieved in women's full enjoyment of their human rights because of ethnic and cultural pluralism, regional dynamics and a strong women's movement had seen a trend which was gradually moving towards a rights-oriented approach to the promotion of women's rights. In a number of countries, actions had been taken to review and challenge laws to secure women's rights to some basic and fundamental freedoms. That process was, however, slow and needed to be accelerated. To that end, the identification of other initiatives and mechanisms and the strengthening of existing ones such as affirmative interventions and increased legal literacy to empower women with knowledge of their human rights was required. Those activities to empower women should not be construed as eliminating the principle of state sovereignty, but rather as a qualification in order to seek balance with the state's obligations to safeguard the human rights of all its citizens.

40. The feminization of migration presented challenges for human rights protection. Women workers were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation largely because of the lack of commitment by countries of origin and destination to promote their interests. Those problems were compounded for illegal women workers and those who were trafficked. The trafficking in women and girls for prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation was particularly serious in several subregions of the Asian and Pacific region.

41. Violence against women in all its forms, including domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse was a grave social problem and needed to be viewed as a human rights concern.

42. Other issues in the agenda of women's human rights in the preservation of peace and equality were the trans-boundary shipment of nuclear reactive materials into the Pacific subregion, increased nuclear technology in the region and the lack of controls, and increased militarization threatening women

and children. The right to self determination of peoples in colonized states was another issue that affected women and had to be addressed within the context of human rights promotion. Intellectual property rights to flora and fauna, traditional knowledge and medicines which were the sole livelihood of most women in the Pacific island states also needed to be addressed.

43. Fostering a climate of attitudinal change through gender sensitization education and training was a priority in the region. That had to outreach all women, indigenous women, refugee and displaced women and women migrants including women migrant workers. The inclusion of men was underscored and the activities of regional forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and the Pacific Community were noted.

Agenda item 5(c): Political empowerment of women

44. The impact of the Fourth World Conference on Women had percolated through national political thinking, as shown in progress achieved in areas such as (a) the increase in women running as candidates and winning elections, (b) quotas/reservation systems established by governments and political parties, (c) training in self-confidence and political skills provided by NGOs, (d) cooperation among governments, NGOs and other sectors working for women's issues and (e) mainstreaming of gender issues in national development plans, including measures to foster women's political development.

45. A recent Inter-Parliamentary Union survey showed that the Asian and Pacific region had more female representatives in national assemblies and senates than other regions. Other studies showed that women had entered local government in larger numbers and had gained a sense of empowerment by gaining control over resources and the decision-making process. However, as far as female participation in politics was concerned, female politicians active in politics were not always actively addressing women's concerns.

46. Despite the progress, the target of achieving 30 per cent representation of women in decision-making positions by 2005, as stipulated by the United Nations, appeared to be beyond the reach of many countries in the region. The obstacles to achieving that goal included the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes that restricted women's political participation and persisting institutional barriers that existed across various socio-political institutions, such as lack of a critical mass of women in politics. Traditional values and lack of training and mentoring often made women doubt their suitability for high-level positions.

Agenda item 5(d): Strategies for the empowerment of women

47. Strategies had been evolving in the region with varying effects for the empowerment of women. Among those strategies, mainstreaming had received significant attention focused on developing institutional mechanisms and strategies to implement effectively a gender-oriented approach in all areas

of the development process. The areas which continued to require attention included the renewal of institutional biases that led to the unequal representation of women in decision-making in all fields at all levels. Mainstreaming was also needed in areas that lacked institutional arrangements to implement a gender perspective in policy formulation, programming and implementation. Similarly, an institutional environment that was more compatible with the gender roles of men than of women needed to be evaluated.

48. Institutional changes (such as affirmative action) were also necessary to facilitate an increase in women's representation and decision-making in all areas of the mainstream. Institutionalization of gender analysis, gender statistics and other techniques of gender mainstreaming required increased attention.

49. In the Asian and Pacific region, there were active NGO partnerships and networking on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, a trend which began even before the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in 1995. However, in reviewing partnerships for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and for women's empowerment, some common problems emerged in governmental organization-NGO partnerships and in collaboration between non-government actors and organizations. Among these were the following: (a) short-term nature of the partnership and collaboration; (b) lack of mechanisms for sustaining partnerships; (c) problems of representativeness of participants; and (d) distrust or ambivalence over the partnership relationship and agenda.

50. Monitoring and evaluation have become useful tools in programme and project management. They have also emerged as key strategies for the empowerment of women, as systematic and rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Platform for Action was of paramount importance for the attainment of the short, medium and long-term goals and thus would eventually lead to the empowerment of women. Reporting in the Asian and Pacific region usually followed a process of planning, execution and administration of activities; reporting to higher units or funding agencies; sharing reports with a wider audience; using indicators to measure success; and instituting a monitoring procedure. There was a continuing need to assess the reporting structures and identify their problems, including reporting overload along with the need for rationalization of reports at the country level, consolidation by the United Nations agencies of needed data, consolidation of reporting formats, reduction and frequency of reports and the need for online databases. To strengthen monitoring and evaluation, there was an ongoing need to follow systematic use of gender sensitive indicators, divided into enabling/input indicators, performance indicators and progress indicators, including innovative indicators such as psychological indicators and qualitative indicators.