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Report on the Asia-Pacific Regional Seminar in Preparation for the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women: Transformative Financing for the Achievement of Gender Equality by 2030

Bangkok, 18 – 19 February 2016



Asia-Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism Thematic Working Group on
Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

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I. ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING

1. The “Asia-Pacific Regional Seminar in preparation for the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women: Transformative financing for the achievement of gender equality by 2030” (forthwith “Regional Seminar”), was held on 18 and 19 February 2016 in Bangkok. It was jointly organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in collaboration with members of the Asia-Pacific United Nations Regional Coordination Mechanism Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women.

2. The Regional Seminar was attended by 85 participants, including representatives of Governments (19), academia, civil society (including the Women’s Major Group), United Nations entities, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

3. The objectives of the Regional Seminar were to prepare government representatives for the 60th session of Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), for which the priority theme would be *Women’s empowerment and its link to sustainable development*, by (a) reviewing research findings and sharing country experiences; (b) identifying good practices and lessons learned, and (c) articulating policy recommendations on financing and investment mechanisms for the advancement of gender equality and women’s empowerment in support of the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda).

4. Opening remarks were made by (a) Ms Laura Lopez, Director of Social Development Division of ESCAP; (b) Ms Caitlin Wiesen, Chief, Regional Programme and Policy Support, UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub; and (c) Ms Roberta Clarke, Regional Director, UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

II. PROCEEDINGS

A. Financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

5. The first substantive session of the Regional Seminar provided an overview of the Asia-Pacific macroeconomic context in relation to the 2030 Agenda and issues surrounding financing the SDGs, drawing on lessons learned from the MDGs. The overview session also included a reflection on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), adopted at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in July 2015.

6. The importance of unlocking large, long-term funds – such as pension funds, Haj funds and sovereign wealth funds – as potential sources of financing the SDGs was emphasized. Leveraging official development assistance (ODA) to incentivize loans, change ideas and strengthen capacity was also noted. It was also asserted that eliminating financial losses associated with criminal activities, corruption, tax evasion and false trade invoices, could yield larger benefits than ODA. In this respect, the necessity of making financing destinations attractive and improving capacities, including at the sub-national level, for realization of the SDGs was stressed.

7. It was observed that as the private sector had become a key player in development, government regulation (including ensuring public disclosure of financial matters) and encouragement of sustainable consumption and production patterns remains critical. It was necessary to align financial resources to the SDGs and to leverage private resources and corporate profits towards sustainable development.

8. The Regional Seminar participants noted that it would be useful to “demystify the SDGs” and focus on the overarching objectives of economic prosperity, social equity and environmental responsibility. To this end, partnerships could be developed to advance shared perspectives across influencers and decision-makers and a systematic dialogue with the private sector would be useful. Regarding the public-private partnerships (PPPs), there was a need to review what had and had not worked in terms of realising shared development goals. It was reflected that public sector funds could be used to encourage private flows, but tracking effectiveness and impact was essential as PPPs – particularly in health and education – had significant equity and gender implications. Tools such as the SDG Compass developed by the United Nations Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development could be used to align private sector strategies with the SDGs and measure and manage the contributions of PPPs to successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

9. Financing the 2030 Agenda would require a comprehensive approach including global actions to (a) transform global rules and systems, including on trade, finance, debt and taxation; (b) ensure that corporations pay taxes in countries where they extract resources; (c) eliminate tax exemptions, and (d) combat illicit financial flows.

10. It was further stated that financing could come from external public and private sources, as well as domestic public and private sources. In order for “no-one to be left behind”, public expenditure would be important; although ODA could play a catalytic role in domestic resource mobilization. In order to increase domestic resource mobilization, review and revision of taxation systems and structures was deemed to be critical; given potential efficiency and equity gains. The importance of attending to the gender-differentiated impact of revenue-raising policies – including the impacts on, and distribution of, unpaid care work and female labour force participation rates – was also stressed.

11. More progressive direct taxation, as well as taxation of property and of capital gains, could also reduce inequalities. It was, however, stressed that where resources, such as fuel subsidies, are allocated towards social justice measures, the gender differentiated implications needed to be taken into account.

12. In a number of developing countries, revenue had not kept pace with expenditure; associated with growing financial deficits and the pressure to service those debts.

13. It was observed that little ODA targeted gender equality as a principal objective and that ODA financing was concentrated in social sectors – mainly health and education – with little funding going to fragile states and to women in peace-building. Significant underinvestment in gender equality remained, particularly in economic and productive sectors where only two per cent of aid to these sectors targeted gender equality as a principal objective. Gender-focused aid for the energy sector and for banking and financial services (that could benefit women) was particularly low. It was noted that it would be important to systematically track and prioritize allocation of ODA in support of gender equality.

14. It was perceived that estimating financing needs for achievement of the SDGs would be difficult due to their cross sectoral and multi-dimensional nature. Gender equality was a stand-alone goal and also cut across other SDGs. Expenditure for each goal would affect, and be affected by, the funding needs for the other goals. Therefore, it was necessary to ensure that synergies and trade-offs were considered. Also, the Millennium Development Goals experience had shown that the costs of implementing policies to support gender equality were often not systematically calculated or integrated into country-level budgeting processes. Therefore, it was deemed important that gender responsive planning and budgeting be an integral part of overall assessment of financing requirements for development.

15. The opinion that user-fees, especially for basic social services, should be avoided was expressed, given that user-fees are associated with inequalities because they tended to disadvantage economically poor persons, including women. The process of developing National Integrated Financing Frameworks – which underpinned SDG planning and budgeting – could be used to integrate a more gender-responsive approach and change processes to reflect inequalities between men and women and their particular needs.

16. Regarding the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and compared to outcome documents adopted by previous conferences on financing for development, the AAAA emphasized domestic resource mobilization, placing a large burden on governments. Many governments may not, however, be able to raise enough resources on their own to meet their countries' development needs. It was thought that small island states and least developed countries would need tailored solutions.

17. Regional Seminar participants held that the AAAA had placed increasing responsibility on the private sector to deliver financing for sustainable development. "Big business" was seen as being supported by incentives and privileges, without being required to feed back into societies from which they drew. The opinion that prioritizing profits had often resulted in a "race to the bottom" at the expense of workers' rights was expressed. It was felt that there was a need to define the type of relationship different actors wanted with the private sector and consider how "big businesses" or transnational corporations were supported as compared with micro, small and medium enterprises, many of which were owned, managed and catered to women. Effective responses to women's infrastructure needs were also required.

18. The AAAA opened possibilities for collaboration with the Commission on the Status of Women. There was a need for engagement with the Global Infrastructure Forum, the Technology Facilitation Mechanism and the annual ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development; from which agreed conclusions and recommendations would feed into the overall follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the high-level political forum on sustainable development. Linking the Commission on the Status of Women with the financing for development processes would strengthen synergy and coherence and engagement with these mechanisms could be a way of ensuring women's voices and needs be heard and addressed; as well as a gender perspective integrated into science, technology, innovation and infrastructure initiatives.

B. Transparency, Accountability and Participation: Fundamentals of Financing

19. The second substantive session addressed transparency and participation in budgeting processes and accountability in international development bank financing. On a global level, transparency, and recently participation, in budgets was tracked every two years by the International Budget Partnership and a rating was assigned based on an Open Budget Index. Globally, most people lived in countries with low accountability, participation and integrity scores; but, on average, there had been a steady increase in the national scores. Yet, in Asia and the Pacific, countries tended to score low in the Open Budget Index and their scores had decreased over the latest reporting period. Only 4 of 102 countries performed well on all pillars; none of which were from the Asia-Pacific region.

20. Participation, oversight and transparency in budgets were all deemed important. It was, however, noted that while greater transparency would make it more likely for gender to be included in budgeting processes and outcomes, making the inclusion of gender explicit was felt to be essential.

21. The example of gender-responsive participatory budgeting in Penang, Malaysia was shared. A tripartite partnership of local government, communities and the Penang Women's Development Corporation had worked for five years to develop its form of gender-responsive participatory budgeting, which integrated principles of state accountability and good governance and which proved to be credible and achieved organizational "buy-in". The Penang initiative involved consultations with diverse groups and the disaggregation of data by sex, income, location and age. Moreover, women's practical needs and strategic interests were given attention.

22. An example of how accountability for gender equality and women's empowerment could be promoted such international financial institutions as the Asian Development Bank was shared. All ADB lending was categorized as (a) gender equity focused; (b) having effective gender mainstreaming, in that it substantially and directly supports gender equality and women's empowerment; (c) containing some gender elements; or (d) having no gender elements. Additionally, in ADB's project management there are Project Gender Action Plans, which serve to mainstream gender throughout the project management cycle, including monitoring and results. In addition, ADB had an external monitoring mechanism to review the gender impact of loans.

23. The Regional Seminar participants further noted that lending by financial institutions could provide leverage for strengthening government capacity, while policy making could be strengthened through South-South Cooperation; with a particular need for gender mainstreaming in such sectors as finance and energy.

24. The importance of transparency at all decision-making levels was stressed by the Regional Seminar participants; as well as the necessity of women's participation and the integration of GRB principles in budgetary processes.

25. The session concluded with a suggestion that the national review process preceding the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (to be held in July 2016) be utilised to advocate for gender-responsive policy.

C. Expenditure for Gender Equality

26. The session on expenditure for gender equality involved reflection on Gender Budget Statements/Reports and the findings of research on the funding of women's organizations.

27. With respect to the former, it was underscored that proxies could be used to undertake a gender analysis of budgets, such as the budget of national women's machineries and national budget statements or reports.

28. It was observed that, in relation to social sector spending, South Asia and East Asia performed below the global average and the Asia-Pacific region was below the global average on spending on social protection; despite evidence that greater social sector spending could strengthen employment and address the care burden imposed on women. Cuts in social sector funding had been shown to have an adverse impact on the needs and interests of women.

29. It was emphasized that both the Ministries of Women's Affairs and the Ministries of Finance have important roles to play in ensuring effective and meaningful gender-responsive budgeting. The importance of rigorous monitoring of expenditures and their impact on gender equality and transformative results was emphasized. It was observed that meeting the particular needs of women is not sufficient to achieve gender equality; but that measures are also required with respect to men, such as gender sensitisation of male police officers.

30. The findings of a study carried out by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) on funding of women's rights organizations were shared. Identified factors impacting upon the environments in which the women's rights organizations included rising fundamentalisms, militarism, violence against women, repression of social movements and increasing private sector involvement in development financing and philanthropy.

31. Of concern to the women's rights organizations was the shift among "donors" towards a "corporate" approach to framing development priorities, financing and measuring development results, including on gender equality; with the consequence that results were assessed for their economic and financial contributions, rather than improvement in the exercise of human rights.

32. Women's rights organizations were financed from a range of sources, including bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor organizations, the private sector, private foundations and individuals, and as well as through crowdfunding. The Dutch MDG3 Fund was cited as good model because (a) it was a source of multi-year financing, which encompassed core functions and projects; (b) facilitated organizational growth; (c) supported work from grass roots to global levels; and (d) it was large in size and scale.

33. Research revealed that feminist organizations had a positive impact on gender responsive policies and programmes and played a key role in achieving gender justice; advocating and helping to bring about sustainable change. Yet the income of women's

organizations globally was significantly lower than that of organizations focused on, for example, environmental protection or the rights and welfare of children. Also, funding to NGOs working on gender equality had doubled, but often at the expense of support for government institutions responsible for gender equality and “women’s affairs”.

34. During this session, the importance of countries being involved in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Working Group on Business Practices and Human Rights was emphasized.

35. During the discussion, participants shared their experiences with gender-responsive budgeting, integrating gender into national development planning and the importance of women’s participation in parliaments and decision-making bodies.

D. Official Development Assistance

36. Session 5 focused on the ODA policies and practices of two donor countries – Australian and Sweden – with respect to gender equality.

37. For the Government of Australia, fairness and substantive equality were core values, with the requirement that the design and implementation of aid attend to gender equality. The Government of Australia had adopted a targeted approach to areas where particular attention was deemed to be needed, including eliminating violence against women and enhancing women’s leadership. For example, a Pacific Fund for Ending Violence Against Women had been created, as had a Gender Equality Fund. The Asia-Pacific region was the main recipient of Australia’s ODA.

38. For Australia, enhancing women’s voice in peace-building, promoting women’s economic empowerment and addressing violence against women were priorities. For middle income countries, technical assistance was provided and attention was given to ways of ensuring that all people benefit from trade. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was increasingly working with private sector entities, such as banks and cruise lines, to encourage companies to conduct business in a way that benefits women.

39. For Sweden, rights, resources and representation were three key principles of its aid policy and ending discrimination and gender inequality were major foci of all development work. Long-standing development priority areas for Sweden included education, health, human rights and peace; while more recently energy, environment and climate change were receiving increased attention. Examples of the Government of Sweden’s gender equality efforts included negotiation with pharmaceutical companies to procure low cost contraceptives for women in low-income countries and partnering with Oxfam in the area of

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