

**Strengthening National Mechanisms for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women:  
Regional Study – Asia and the Pacific**

**May 2010**

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# CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>I. CONTEXT FACTORS THAT IMPINGE ON NATIONAL MECHANISMS....</b>	<b>6</b>
A. Traditional Gender Roles.....	6
B. Economic Context .....	7
C. Political Context.....	12
<b>II. THE EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL MECHANISMS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
A. Responses to International Conventions and Declarations.....	14
B. Critical Events in States.....	15
C. Constitutional and Legislative Reforms on Gender Equality .....	16
D. Executive and Legislative Reforms for Gender Mainstreaming.....	17
E. Donor Concerns for Gender Equality.....	18
F. Women’s Non-governmental Organizations and Women’s Rights Advocates....	18
<b>III. PROFILE OF NATIONAL MECHANISMS.....</b>	<b>19</b>
A. Mandates of National Mechanisms .....	19
B. Structures of National Mechanisms .....	19
C. Type and Location of National Mechanisms .....	20
D. Other Mechanisms for Gender Equality .....	21
E. Roles and Functions of National Mechanisms.....	21
F. Gender Focal Points .....	25
G. Roles of Other National Mechanisms for Gender Equality.....	26
H. Roles of Women’s Organizations .....	27
I. Regional Mechanisms .....	28
J. Composition of National Mechanisms .....	29
K. Resources for Gender Mainstreaming .....	30
<b>IV. MAIN AREAS OF FOCUS OF NATIONAL MECHANISMS.....</b>	<b>33</b>
A. Priority Issues.....	33
B. Globalization, Poverty and Economic Opportunities.....	34
C. Migration and Trafficking .....	35
D. Violence Against Women.....	36
E. Women and Natural Disaster Management.....	37
F. Partnership with Non-governmental Organizations and Civil Society .....	38
G. Implementation of Other Concerns in the Beijing Platform for Action.....	38

<b>V.</b>	<b>INSTRUMENTS FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY .....</b>	<b>40</b>
A.	Millennium Development Goals .....	40
B.	Gender Information and Sex-Disaggregated Data .....	40
C.	Gender Sensitization and Capacity-Building .....	41
D.	Legislation Promoting Gender Equality .....	42
E.	Gender Budgets .....	43
<b>VI.</b>	<b>COLLABORATIVE MECHANISMS FOR GENDER EQUALITY.....</b>	<b>45</b>
A.	Single Mechanisms Linked Vertically .....	45
B.	Mechanisms with Horizontal and Vertical Linkages .....	45
C.	Channels of Collaboration and Information Exchange .....	48
<b>VII.</b>	<b>KEY AREAS OF SUCCESS, GAINS AND ACHIEVEMENTS.....</b>	<b>49</b>
A.	Increased Capacity of Mechanisms to Mainstream Gender .....	49
B.	Inclusive and Holistic Approaches to the Promotion of Gender Equality .....	51
C.	Efforts to End Discrimination against Women .....	54
D.	Increased Public Awareness and Support for Gender Equality .....	57
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>LIMITATIONS AND GAPS.....</b>	<b>58</b>
A.	Analytic Framework.....	58
B.	Focus of Mandates and Functions .....	58
C.	Structures, Resources, Processes and Measures .....	59
D.	Lack of Implementation of Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Goals .....	61
<b>IX.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION: REMAINING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES .....</b>	<b>62</b>
A.	Sustained Action for Gender Equality.....	62
B.	Political Will .....	63

## Annexes

REFERENCES.....	65
TABLE 1.....	73
APPENDIX.....	74

## Introduction

This paper was commissioned by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asian and the Pacific as part of a global project entitled “Strengthening National Mechanisms for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women”. The project is a joint project between the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and the five United Nations Regional Commissions. It aims to strengthen collaborations and synergies between different mechanisms at national levels to facilitate the goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Towards this end, the regional study on Asia and the Pacific has been prepared in order to identify main trends and processes in the development of the national mechanisms for the advancement of women within the region.

In this study, the term “national mechanisms for gender equality” is understood to include those bodies and institutions within different branches of the State (legislative, executive and judicial branches) as well as independent, accountability and advisory bodies that together are recognized as “national mechanisms for gender equality” by all stakeholders.

The countries covered by this study are ESCAP member States, with the exception of those covered by other regional reports, such as the countries of Central Asia, the Russian Federation and Turkey. The report covers 48 countries belonging to four subregions: North and North-East Asia, South-East Asia, South and South-West Asia, and the Pacific (see table 1)<sup>1</sup>.

The paper starts with an analysis of contextual factors that influence the formation, functions, and directions of national mechanisms. Context factors may ensue from economic, cultural, political, social and institutional trends in the Asia and the Pacific region. Against this background, an analysis of the different types of mechanisms for gender equality and women’s empowerment which have been established at the national level since 1995 is made. Their main areas of focus, instruments and processes are described in order to increase understanding of priorities and strategies for strengthened collaboration and synergies between mechanisms for gender equality and women’s empowerment, within and across subregions. The key areas of action of the national mechanisms are analysed further in terms of their successes, limitations, gaps, potentials and remaining challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the sources of country information are the responses to two separate questionnaires: one questionnaire on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly circulated to all ESCAP member States as preparation for the regional review and appraisals in the context of the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2010; and one questionnaire prepared for the collection of information and data to support the regional studies on national mechanisms for gender equality circulated to all ESCAP member States in 2009.

## **I. Context Factors that Impinge on National Mechanisms**

The Asia and the Pacific region is characterized by extreme variations and polarities in cultural, economic, social and political features. It is home to diverse ethnic and demographic groups. While there are countries which have attained robust economic growth, others are struggling economically. Democratization has advanced significantly in some areas, but militarization, ethnic and intercountry conflicts continue in others. Many countries have made rapid strides in health, education, information and communications, but there are still countries where indicators for these factors remain problematic. The impacts of globalization on women have been double-edged, and are implicated in issues of poverty, migration and human trafficking. Women's vulnerability in the face of natural disasters has increased, often resulting in displacement, unexpected economic responsibilities, trafficking, violence and other human rights violations.

### **A. Traditional gender roles**

Asia is one region where culture and tradition play an important role, affecting almost every aspect of life. The family is given importance, often within the context of traditional definitions and differentiations of gender roles for women and men. These patterns are evident in the developing nations of the ESCAP region, but are also seen in the industrialized nations of East Asia (Inoguchi and Newman, 1997).

In South Asia, patriarchy, seclusion, and the power of the family to exercise social control over male and female activities mean that most women are unaware of their rights and lack the means to realize them (Heerah, 2006; Frankl, 2004). India, for instance, has some of the oldest and most active women's organizations in the region, which have been able to successfully advocate for the passage of laws to protect women's rights. However, the Government has often been unable to enforce these laws, especially in rural areas where traditions are deeply rooted. Thus, laws relating to the ownership of assets and land have accorded women little control over land use, retention, or sale in most places (OneWomen 2009).

In South-East Asia, traditional definitions of gender roles continue to persist. For instance, behaviour norms for Cambodian women, known as *Chba'p*, constrain their ability to access opportunities outside of the household (UNIFEM, 2004). In Timor-Leste, a dominant patriarchal system delegates different functions and responsibilities to men and women. As a result, there has been less investment in the education of girls as compared to boys and women have lower participation rates in the workforce. Furthermore, many women do not participate in decision-making processes, especially in politics.

In the Pacific, the progress of national plans for women and gender equality is significantly hampered by stereotypical attitudes and values of both women and men with regard to their gender roles. In Tuvalu, for instance, the status of women is determined by their roles as wives and mothers, and on how they obey and respect the norms of Tuvalu society (Kofe, 2006). New Zealand, however, holds the distinction of having been the first country in the world to grant women the right to suffrage and the first to elect a woman to an elective position. Women in New Zealand maintain a high profile in politics and have been elected to Parliament as well as to local political positions. It has had two consecutive female prime ministers, Jenny Shipley (1997-1999) and Helen Clark (1999-2008). During the Government of Helen Clark, women held all the top public positions (OneWomen, 2000b). Yet, despite women's visibility in public life, gender stereotypes remain a problem, especially in relation to the situation of indigenous and migrant women, in particular those from the Pacific islands in the latter case (CEDAW, 2006b).

In the subregion of North-East Asia, traditional views on gender roles have remained an impediment to the realization of full gender equality. However, favourable economic conditions, coupled with pressure from educated and politicized women to institute changes, have led to the introduction of innovative laws, policies and programmes that help to advance the gender equality agenda of national mechanisms.

Traditional gender roles contribute to the persistence of domestic violence as a common and serious problem in many countries. Social and cultural concerns, about shaming one's family and endangering the reputation of one's spouse or offspring, allow domestic violence to go unreported. In other cases, it is the economic powerlessness of women that serves as a deterrent to the reporting of abuse. These sentiments, combined with ineffective prosecution, make progress against domestic violence difficult. In a survey undertaken in India by the National Family Health Survey, 56 per cent of women interviewed stated that domestic violence was justified (OneWomen 2009). In Fiji, it was estimated that some 10 per cent of women have been abused (OneWomen 2001b). The same situation exists in other parts of Asia and the Pacific, including the more developed economies of Australia, Brunei Darussalam, China, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea.

The philosophical system that underlies the dominant culture is another feature of Asian and Pacific nations that impacts gender equality efforts. The philosophy may be translated into an ethical structure governing behaviour (Confucianism or Hinduism) or is represented by a religious institution (for example, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism or Protestantism). Either way, the intersection between cultural traditions and ethical-religious values is so close that it is often difficult to determine whether issues of gender inequality come from one or the other. In many instances, the deep cleavages in the gender division of labour across different nations is attributed to religious values, even if closer analysis reveals that it is the cultural interpretation of an ethic that is responsible (Gross, 1993; Ahmed, 2002; Mananzan, 2004; Rosenlee, 2006).

Education, democratization processes and women's increased consciousness of gender equality values have modified some norms governing gender relations. But the process has not been able to completely transform stereotypical expectations into norms of gender parity in both productive and reproductive spheres. What is worrisome is the upsurge in recent decades of conservative or fundamentalist views on religion which serve to deepen gender differentiations rather than transform them.

Conservative ethical and religious values account for linkages made between women's mechanisms and government agencies in charge of families, communities or disadvantaged groups. This is because it is easier to address women's rights in terms of their roles in the family and community rather than as individuals and citizens endowed with human agency; or as disempowered, dependent persons in need of measures that will ease their plight, rather than in terms of strategies that will significantly change their circumstances. What is at issue, therefore, is not necessarily religious beliefs but the imposition of patriarchal values in the name of ethics and morality in order to reinforce the subordination of women in Asia and the Pacific.

## **B. Economic context**

Since 2005, six nations in the Asia and the Pacific region have attained high human development according to Human Development Index (HDI) scores above 0.90: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and Singapore (UNDP, 2005a; UNDP, 2009) along with Hong Kong, China. A majority of the other nations belong to the group enjoying medium human development, although Malaysia has been re-classified

as having high human development as of 2009 (HDI=0.829; UNDP, 2009). Thailand is ranked highest among the Asian nations in the medium human development group for 2009 (HDI=0.783; UNDP, 2009). China improved its score from HDI=0.755 to HDI=0.772, while India's human development index score has remained more or less stagnant over the past five years (from HDI=0.602 to HDI=0.612) (UNDP, 2005a; UNDP, 2009). According to the human development index, two States in the region have been classified as having low human development: Timor-Leste (HDI=0.489) and Afghanistan (HDI=0.352; UNDP, 2009).

### **1. Highly developed economies: Australia, New Zealand and Brunei Darussalam**

Robust business and consumer confidence, a strong domestic market and high export levels helped place Australia and New Zealand among the fastest growing economies of the region in the last 20 years (ESCAP 2008; CIA, 2009). Both nations have instituted programmes to increase the participation of women in the labour force. Still, a wage gap persists, with women's earnings being less than those of men. In fact, data released in 2009 indicates that the disparity in pay between working men and women in Australia is widening. In New Zealand, the difference in the average hourly earnings of women and men was 14 per cent in 2003 and has been relatively stable for a number of years. In both countries, women's care responsibilities, the undervaluation of women's work, occupational and industry segregation, lack of job security, and lower educational attainments are implicated as factors responsible for the disadvantageous position of women in those economies.

Brunei Darussalam is an independent sultanate governed on the basis of a written constitution. Women enjoy equal opportunities with men regarding education, medical treatment, social welfare and employment. Its policy of universal education has been cited as the factor responsible for the sharp rise in the number of literate women, for an increase in the number of women in the labour force and for the higher level of participation by women at all levels of society. Despite its high level of human development, gender discrimination remains a continuing problem. Brunei Darussalam is ranked 95th out of 134 countries on the Gender Gap Index (Hausmann, 2009). The national machinery confirms that it lacks sufficient resources to facilitate the mainstreaming of gender concerns in national programmes and policies. Instead of gender equality, the national machinery is concerned with developing awareness among women of their roles and responsibilities in strengthening the family unit for "harmonious living in family life, society and the nation," and to participate in development "without compromising the stability of their marriage/family life". (The Brunei Darussalam Report on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action)

### **2. High economic growth in Asia**

Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore as well as Hong Kong, China and Taiwan Province of China are known as the tiger economies of Asia. These countries are among the

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