

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

**East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting
Tokyo, Japan
30 June-1 July 2006**

**Keynote address
by
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Your Excellency, Dr. Kuniko Inoguchi,
Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, Government of Japan,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this important occasion today, it is my privilege and pleasure to join you all – Ministers in charge of gender equality and the advancement of women and heads of other national machineries for gender equality.

At the outset, let me express my deep appreciation to Dr. Kuniko Inoguchi, Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs of Japan, for proposing this event to promote gender equality in East Asia and beyond. I sincerely thank the Government of Japan for convening this Meeting.

The importance of integrating a gender dimension into a range of social and economic development issues has long been recognized by the organization I head, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). As the regional arm of the United Nations in the Asia-Pacific region, UNESCAP has been using its convening authority and legislative responsibility to provide both normative and technical assistance to the region's policy makers, especially those in the national machineries for the advancement of women.

After the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 in the Fourth World Conference on Women, UNESCAP has periodically organized regional review meetings to assess progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and discussing how to tackle new emerging priorities. We also facilitate the sharing of experiences among our subregions.

Our meetings have provided forums for senior officials from the national machineries for the advancement of women throughout the region to network, and share good practices and lessons learned from failures. Just six months ago in Jakarta, we convened such a meeting in

cooperation with the Government of Indonesia. I am pleased that many of the countries represented here today had also participated in that meeting.

In our active support for the cause of gender equality in Asia and the Pacific over the past 25 years, UNESCAP has been privileged to be closely associated with the struggle that many of you have devoted your lives to. The credit goes to you all and to those of your co-workers at home who have created positive changes in the landscape of institutional and legal domains. Today, we have hard-won national policies and action plans, many more national machineries and other institutional mechanisms and legal reforms aimed at eliminating gender discrimination.

Nevertheless, we still face problems of insufficient resources and the marginalization of institutional mechanisms. As with many plans and laws, lack of implementation demands our continued vigilance and attention. To compound these problems, countries also have to address emerging issues such as those stemming from globalization and changing population dynamics.

Allow me to touch on some specific challenges. One is migration and human trafficking. In April this year, at UNESCAP's annual session, the Ministry of Women Empowerment of Indonesia worked with UNESCAP to organize a side event on *Asia-Pacific Perspectives on Gender Dimensions of International Migration and Regional Preparations for the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development*. It was clear from the strength of interest generated, that this has become a priority issue for many countries. It is time to pay more attention to better managed migration.

Gender equality and empowerment are essential for the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs. Although Goal 3 specifically addresses gender equality and the empowerment of women, countries of the region are not likely to make significant progress on most of the goals without addressing the link between gender-based discrimination and violence and large-scale problems such as HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality.

The recent second regional MDG report produced jointly by UNESCAP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNDP highlighted the significant gains of the Asian and Pacific region in reducing poverty, especially in East Asia. There has been progress in material well-being as evidenced by improvements in women's health indicators, educational achievement, and economic participation. However, unmet needs persist with some countries still lagging behind in secondary and tertiary education, health care and services, and we all too often see the signs of persistent feminization of poverty.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asian and Pacific region experiences the most natural disasters in the world. We saw in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami how many people were denied access to relief because they were old, very young, disabled or simply because they were women. In UNESCAP's work on early warning systems and on coping with the social and economic impact of natural disasters, we are pointing out to policy makers the differentiated impact on men and women, and measures needed to address the gender dimensions of the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups.

In the increasingly globalized world in which we live, the digital divide impacts the lives of those who have been left out of the "information age". Women and girls who are

denied access to education and information and communication technologies are cut off from the knowledge-based economy and are relegated to fewer opportunities and life choices and low-paid jobs with no security. Many struggle without adequate protection and in high-risk working conditions in the informal sector. In this regard, our newly-opened UNESCAP Asia and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology (APCICT) stands ready to help countries bridge the digital divide, including the gender digital divide.

Judicial systems -- and human rights commissions, where they exist -- are important mechanisms for eliminating discrimination against women through changes in laws and the upholding of human rights standards. Despite the fact that the majority of countries have signed the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), too few law makers, judges and others who have an important role to play in its implementation, are sufficiently versed in the Convention to use it effectively to benefit women.

Efficient legal and institutional frameworks and mechanisms to protect women's rights and enable them to fully participate in decision-making at all levels are necessary. National machineries could play a more vibrant role in this regard. I urge you to make full use of CEDAW and other human rights instruments, including taking action, in partnership with civil society, in line with concluding recommendations on reports to treaty bodies. The Optional Protocol to CEDAW is also an important means of enabling women to claim their rights and I urge all countries to sign on to the Protocol.

In UNESCAP we are working to mainstream a gender perspective into all of our programme areas. In addition to the areas that I have already mentioned, we take into consideration the way that women may be affected differently from men when transportation systems are built, tourism is developed and international trade is conducted.

We know that mainstreaming is a *process* and all the dimensions of gender in economic and social development are not obvious to everyone. I am sure that the issues that we face are similar to those that many of you encounter in mainstreaming gender concerns.

It is an uphill task to persuade others to see the world through a lens that they are not familiar with --- be that a gender lens, a human rights lens, a youth or any other lens. It requires a different way of looking at relations, power, roles, structures and institutions. It also requires reflecting on the costs of ignoring discrimination. And, it requires sex-disaggregated data. For without such data, budgets will not be allocated equitably.

Within UNESCAP, we have a gender mainstreaming task force which advises me on gender mainstreaming policy, strategy and implementation tools for incorporating gender in programme budgets and planning. Gender training courses are regularly conducted to strengthen the institutional capacity of UNESCAP to mainstream gender in all aspects of its work.

I have briefly touched on a number of concrete examples of how the importance of gender equality is being acknowledged and addressed by governments and international organizations. However, bringing about real changes has proved to be much harder. Ministries for gender equality and other bodies or mechanisms such as gender equality commissions are often severely under-resourced for the herculean tasks that they are mandated to perform. I wish to pay tribute to the accomplishments of the offices that you represent and the formidable challenges that you address with dedication and commitment.

At this Meeting, you will discuss important issues on strengthening national machineries. It is indeed timely to intensify the discourse on gender equality and to put policies and plans into action. The way forward will have to include sustainable institutional structures; effective strategies particularly gender mainstreaming, including accountability and monitoring; and processes and tools such as gender budgets. I must also stress the importance of strengthening mechanisms and capacity to address persistent and emerging issues, through partnerships – both with diverse government entities and with civil society and the private sector.

I am very pleased to note that the Meeting recognizes the importance of regional cooperation and partnership and will deliberate on promising initiatives to deepen and strengthen networking among participating countries. It is my hope that, in addition to sharing experiences, your participation will lead to joint action on tackling issues of common concern, including transboundary issues, and raise regional cooperation for the advancement of Asian and Pacific women to new heights.

As the regional arm of the United Nations in the Asia-Pacific region, we in UNESCAP will continue to support you in every way possible. Let us know how we may serve you better.

I look forward to hearing your views and learning from you about ways to better promote gender equality in the region.

Thank you.
