

**The 4th East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting:
*Building Resilience to the Global Economic Crisis and Moving Forward***

Joint Statement

1. We, the Ministers and other representatives of the national institutions in charge of gender equality issues of 12 East Asian countries, as well as the representatives of 3 international organisations, convened in Siem Reap, Cambodia, on 17-18 November 2011 to hold the 4th *East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting and the Empowerment of Women*. This Ministerial Meeting, entitled *Building Resilience to the Global Economic Crisis and Moving Forward*, was part of the continuing efforts of each country and the region to face the multiple dimensions of the global economic crisis and its impacts on gender equality. Therefore, we adopt the following as the shared view of all participants of the Ministerial Meeting, and call for reinvigorated commitments, strategic partnerships and solid actions to achieve our aims.

Moving forward towards more sustainable and inclusive development

2. The global economic crisis, gender-differentiated market failures, institutional constraints and persistent social norms often combine to reinforce gender inequalities and make improving gender equality much more complex. We are committed to addressing all the multiple constraints that underlie persistent gender gaps.

3. We commit ourselves to designing and implementing measures that aim to support a sustainable and balanced economic recovery taking into account the potential and contributions of women. We recognise that we cannot have balanced and sustainable growth without gender equality. In addition, we are committed to ensuring that this process delivery is complemented by adequate transparency and monitoring systems to ensure accountability. To this end, we recognise the importance of monitoring for results and harmonising efforts among our national machineries, among our line ministries and with our development partners as well as tapping into civil society and engaging the private sector and gender advocates and experts.

4. We are committed to designing and implementing gender-responsive policies. We will champion the principles and practice of gender-responsive budgets, to ensure that resource allocations respond to the needs of women who are most affected by the crisis. We are cognisant that any future growth will be bounded by the limits of the Earth's capacity to provide ecosystem services, and that the green economy approach will be of central importance in that policy design and implementation process. In addition, public-private partnerships are needed to promote women entrepreneurs in the green economy sector to create more and greener employment, and to move the best of their enterprises into the formal and export sectors.

5. We take note of the goals in the "Global Green New Deal" framework put forward in 2010 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in response to the economic crisis: (i) reviving the world economy, saving and creating jobs and protecting vulnerable groups; (ii) promoting sustainable and inclusive growth and the achievement of the MDGs, especially ending extreme poverty by 2015; and (iii) reducing carbon dependency and ecosystem degradation. We affirm that the achievement of these goals requires a gender-mainstreamed approach, and we commit ourselves to advancing these in our domestic programmes and in our dialogue with our international partners.

6. We acknowledge the need for national policies to show recognition of, and commitment to, work–life balance. Therefore, we agree to address issues related to work–life balance, such as the compliance of employers, including in the private sector, with regard to maternity leave and maternity benefits in general; paternity leave; child care services; discouraging the culture of long working hours; and work flexibility regulations. Furthermore, we recognise the importance of a strategic partnership between the State, the private sector and civil society in order to encourage the adoption of gender- and family-friendly corporate social responsibility practice and to provide support and security for more balanced work–family–life patterns.

7. In building resilience to the economic crisis that is affecting our countries in East Asia, we are committed to implementing the measures mentioned above and other measures, including:

Increased public spending and investments in sustainable agriculture: We recognise that more needs to be done to redesign agriculture, emphasising the gender equality and resource enhancement dimensions.

Protection of micro-credit: We acknowledge that micro-credit is a lifeline for women and needs special attention during economic crisis. We recognise that monetary authorities, for example, should make sure that (i) state-owned banks provide uninterrupted financing for micro-credit schemes and institutions; and (ii) commercial banks that receive liquidity support from central banks maintain stable levels of funding for micro-credit.

Sustained aid flows and improved aid effectiveness: We acknowledge that most of our countries in East Asia should make sure that bilateral and multilateral assistance continues in priority areas and is harmonised and coordinated under the leadership of the countries themselves in order to avoid duplication and enhance effectiveness.

Promotion of women’s participation in decision making: We will continue to support women’s participation in political life, their running for public office and their holding of political portfolios and responsibilities. We will promote the legal identity and rights of those women in the informal economy as workers, entrepreneurs, and asset holders; giving legal recognition to member-based organisations of informal women workers; and supporting inclusive reform processes for the legal empowerment of informal women workers.

Promotion of male involvement in gender equality initiatives and in the share of care and parenting: Men’s share in domestic responsibilities decreases the workload of women and improves their work–family balance. The equitable division of domestic work and parenting not only supports women in finding to a work-life balance, it also gives men opportunities to live outside the masculinity stereotypes imposed on them and help them discover new roles for themselves in their families as fathers and as responsible partners. We commit to launch initiatives to promote a more positive role of men in advancing gender equality and in responsible fatherhood.

Emulating lessons learnt to achieve “traction” for many approaches: We are committed to analysing and implementing evidence-based policies and to learning from other good practices and experiences to design our own agenda for building resilience to the economic crisis and enhancing women’s empowerment.

Strategic partnership and collaboration for effectiveness

8. The Member States of the East Asia region are dedicated to ensuring that our strategic partnership will reverse the negative consequences of the economic crisis to enhance the quality of life for women and girls in the region, within in a sustainable development framework. We will continue to cooperate in networking and collaborating with international and civil society organisations in projects that advance gender equality. We will put in place more effective and efficient monitoring and evaluation systems and ensure the integration of the gender perspective in all policy areas, including official development assistance.

Closing

9. We are strongly motivated by the success of this Ministerial Meeting in Cambodia. Furthermore, since we face the common challenges posed by enduring economic crisis and environmental deterioration, we hereby pledge to further reinforce our strategic partnership and collaboration for advocating gender-sensitive approaches in all policy areas, in order to enhance gender equality and green economic growth in the East Asia region.

10. We reiterate that strong political will and leadership are essential to more concrete performance and to achievement of our shared goals. We will continue to give leadership where we are mandated, and we call for the same political will and leadership among our colleagues in government, the private sector and civil society.

11. Encouraged by the success of the 4th East Asia Gender Equality Ministerial Meeting, hosted by Cambodia and chaired by its Minister of Women's Affairs, we resolve to continue the Ministerial Meeting process on a biannual basis.

Annex

International and regional commitments

Each country in East Asia, as well as the regional network, has made progress in generating the institutional framework and implementing policies to promote and achieve the goal of gender equality. Visible advances include the fact that women now live longer and are better educated and that, in some countries of our region, girls are outperforming boys in education, with a widening gap in favour of girls in post-secondary schools. However, although women have entered the labour force in large numbers across most of our countries, this increased participation has not been translated into equal employment opportunities or equal earnings for women and men. In almost all countries, women are more likely than men to engage in low-productivity activities. These disparities jeopardise the everyday lives and human rights of a significant number of women and girls. Existing difficulties have been exacerbated by the current global economic and environmental crisis; the challenges related to achieving a better work–life balance; the constraints posed by climate change and insufficient understanding of and commitment to a green economy; and a number of other concerns particularly relevant to our region, such as a lack of gender-sensitive labour and migration policies and practice.

Overall, we recognise that global and regional commitments can make significant differences in the quality of life of women and men only if they are translated into concrete actions. This Ministerial Meeting in Cambodia provides us with an invaluable opportunity to discuss common challenges, strategies and directions for future action, cooperation and partnership to obtain the best return on our investments and regional synergies.

The global crisis

As a result of gender inequalities and power imbalances that predate the current crisis, additional afflictions have fallen disproportionately on those who were already structurally disempowered and marginalised. These pre-existing inequalities, which include under-representation of women at all levels of economic decision-making, their limited access to business literacy and to resources and their over-representation in informal, vulnerable and casual employment, are often more significant than the gender inequalities that have arisen specifically from the crisis.

Experience with previous crises has shown that economic meltdowns can lead to significant setbacks in the global fight against poverty and inequality, with serious implications for women. The current crisis has already started to take its toll on women workers, who make up a huge part of the flexible workforce that can easily be discarded during economic downturns. Meanwhile, large-scale formal private sector firms, as in the garment and tourism sectors, reversals in internal and external migration are also having a disproportionate impact on women migrants, who constitute the majority of low-skilled, low-salaried and temporary workers.

The green economy

We are faced with growing and interlinked crises of climate change, resource degradation, social inequity—especially for poor women—and economic meltdown. A major restructuring of global and national economies is needed if sustainable and equitable development is to be achieved. Such a restructuring must ensure that

gains and losses in terms of ecosystem services (natural capital) and social inclusion and justice, especially for women (human capital), are taken into account in public and private investment decisions.

Green growth is defined as a path which results in “improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”. A green economy is low carbon, resource efficient, and socially inclusive. In a green economy, growth in income and employment should be driven by public and private investments that reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance energy and resource efficiency, and prevent the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services”. A major challenge lies in reconciling the competing economic development aspirations of the rich and the poor in a world economy that is facing increasing climate change, energy insecurity and ecological scarcity. Innovation by women and men working within a green economy offers a wide range of opportunities for poverty reduction, social inclusion and sustainable development in all sectors, especially agriculture, fisheries, water resources, biodiversity conservation, renewable energy, manufacturing, waste reduction and management, transportation, sustainable tourism and urban planning. Increased investment in the education and economic empowerment of women will therefore be among the key elements of strategy.

The Rio Declaration (1992) states that women have a vital role in environmental management and development, and that their full participation is therefore essential to achieving sustainable development. The green economy holds a clear promise to build sustainable communities that are energy efficient, safe and healthy. It also promises to move more women onto career paths that will offer them the opportunity to become economically secure, support themselves and their families, and to participate more fully in the decision-making and management work of our societies. The economic empowerment of women is therefore a key element in achieving gender equality. Micro and small enterprises in the informal sector actually provide the majority of employment in many of our countries, especially for women.

Work–life balance

Women’s labour force participation is increasing significantly across the region thanks to better education, career aspirations and roles as primary or secondary earners for their families. However, the absence of gender-friendly child care and the inequitable division of care tasks between women and men in the household have left women with a disproportionate double burden at home and in the work place, resulting in work–life conflicts, stress and stress-related sicknesses, overwork, workplace absenteeism and neglect of children. The enforcement of gender-friendly policies in the workplace and an equitable repartition of domestic care work are essential if women are to cope with both their family responsibilities and their economic activities, especially in times of economic crisis, when women or their family members may be at risk of being displaced from gainful employment. Despite economic and social modernisation, in a number of East Asian societies women’s roles continue to be defined primarily within the household. Household obligations may come as a particular shock to young wives in East Asia because very few live on their own before marriage: most live with their parents well into adulthood. Most young women in East Asia work before marriage. Until very recently, however, most of these women dropped out of the labour market when they had their first child and remained out of the labour force during their prime child-bearing and child-rearing years.

Labour and migration

When the global economic crisis struck in 2008, large numbers of women in East Asia shouldered the brunt of its impacts. They were hit by the first-round impacts in terms of job losses in export-oriented industries; unemployment and underemployment; and the knock-on effects on informal employment such as a lack of social insurance and of access to credit, finance and cash. Furthermore, the crisis revealed that the informal sector's resilience to downturns was a myth and that women themselves have no safety nets to rely on. As in past economic and financial crises, in our countries, as a result of existing gender gaps in the labour market, the current crisis has affected various social groups differently depending on their gender and the sectors in which they work. We acknowledge that the impact here has again not been limited to formal sector jobs. Workers in the informal economy, where women are over-represented in many of our countries, have also been negatively affected.