

EDITORIAL

Linking the MDGs with the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW in Southeast Asia

By Patricia B. Licuanan

The Southeast Asia Women Watch (SEAWWatch),¹ along with many women's nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in the Philippines, welcomed the position taken by the world leaders during their 2005 World Summit on the issue of gender equality. In the World Summit Outcome Document, the world leaders recognized gender equality as being essential for sustained economic growth, poverty reduction, and employment creation. They also reaffirmed the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action² and the outcome of the 23rd Special Session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly³ as essential to achieving the internationally agreed development goals including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.⁴ It is notable that the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit adopted the language of the political declaration issued by the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women on Beijing+10.⁵

The world leaders paid attention to the recommendations of the women's groups that actively participated in the civil society hearings leading up to World Summit. Echoing the recommendations of the Task Force on Education and Gender Equality of the UN Millennium Project,⁶ the women's organizations recommended that not only should the gender perspective be mainstreamed in all the goals but also that Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG 3) on gender equality should be expanded. Paragraph 58 of the World Summit Outcome Document contained the world leaders' resolve to eliminate pervasive gender discrimination in primary and secondary education; property and housing rights; access to reproductive health; access to labor markets, sustainable employment, and labor protection; and representation in government decision-making bodies; as well as the elimination of all forms of violence against women and the girl child.

Monitoring Gender and the MDGs in Southeast Asia

SEAWWatch has embarked on a five-country study on Gender and the MDGs. The planned outputs are alternative country reports on the MDGs with a focus on their effects and impact on gender equality and the elimination of discrimination against women. Participating countries are Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. SEAWWatch researchers from these countries met in Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines on 21-22 October 2005 to review the data availability in their respective countries and to agree on the focus of the country reports. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung is providing some funds for this project, while the Women and Gender Institute (WAGI) of Miriam College is coordinating the study and will prepare the synthesis paper.

The research project will help bring back into the center of development agenda two key instruments for women's equality and empowerment, which are the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It focuses on:

1. MDG Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger. The research disaggregates by sex, where available, the indicators under MDG Goal 1 on poverty, analyses gender gaps where found, and explores linkages that could either explain the persistence or emergence of gender gaps, or raise issues about the quality of life (empowerment/disempowerment) of women that may exist beneath apparent gender neutral data.
2. MDG Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality. The research provides baseline information on the newly adopted priorities as approved

¹ A network of women's nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in Southeast Asia.

² The outcome documents of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

³ This special session reviewed 5 years of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁴ These include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

⁵ This session included a 10-year review of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁶ The final task force report, *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women* (2006), was coauthored by Caren Grown, another member of ADB's External Forum on Gender and Development, and is available at www.unmillenniumproject.org.

during the UN World Summit in 2005 on gender equality and empowerment of women.

3. MDG Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health. In the developing and least developed countries in Southeast Asia, maternal health continues to be a serious problem as evidenced by very high maternal mortality rate (MMR). It also indicates the sorry state of reproductive health services leaving women living in poor communities and in remote rural areas very vulnerable. For this reason, this research includes Goal 5.

The publication containing the outputs of the study is targeted for release by the end of 2006. The book will be launched in each of the participating countries as a way of raising awareness by both governments and women's NGOs of the gender and women's rights dimensions of the MDGs.

By way of example, the Philippine country paper, which is being written by Annie A. Serrano of WAGI, predicts that the Philippines will be unable to meet its target for reducing the MMR. The global as well as the national target is to "reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio." She found the two Philippine country reports on the MDGs admitting that there have been no indications of improvement in the MMR. She wrote:

"In 1990, MMR in the Philippines was estimated to be at 209 deaths per 100,000 live births. By 1998, MMR was at 172 although the first and second Philippine Progress Reports on the MDGs qualify that 'due to large sampling errors associated with these estimates, it is difficult to conclude that the MMR has declined.' Following the Philippine MDG target 6, MMR in the Philippines should go down to 52 in the year 2015. From all indications, the country will not be able to meet this target."

The draft SEAWWatch Philippine country paper also noted that the Philippine Government has expanded its commitments under maternal health to reflect the global consensus at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Philippines added a second target to "increase access to reproductive health (RH) services to 60 percent by 2005, 80 percent by 2010, and 100 percent by 2015" (Philippine MDG target 7). Unfortunately, the Government has not yet established the appropriate indicator system to monitor progress and admitted the difficulty of monitoring accessibility to reproductive health services.

The seriousness of the Philippine problem of maternal health and the lack of access by women to reproductive health services did not escape the attention of the CEDAW Committee, which conducted its dialogue with the Philippine Government on 15 August 2006 on its Fifth and Sixth Country Report as state party to CEDAW. In its draft concluding comments, the CEDAW Committee expressed concern on the inadequate recognition and protection of the reproductive health and rights of women in the Philippines, and the high MMRs. The draft committee report continued:

"The Committee urges the State party to take concrete measures to enhance women's access to health care, in particular to sexual and reproductive health services, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention and the Committee's general recommendations 24 on women and health...."

Strengthening Advocacy for Women's Human Rights in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia

The WAGI of Miriam College is a partner of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in its seven-country project to facilitate the implementation of CEDAW. In the Philippines, WAGI was tasked to develop a framework for implementing CEDAW in the Philippines, which UNIFEM is preparing to publish. WAGI also designed and conducted a training course for government officials and staff on what is CEDAW, what are the obligations of the state, and how can their respective agencies contribute to meeting State obligations. UNIFEM asked WAGI to develop a similar course for the Southeast Asia region. The UNIFEM CEDAW Project is being implemented in Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam, with funding assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency.

In the Philippines, the CEDAW Watch Network has recently been formed. Envisioned to be a multi-sectoral network of women's human rights advocates, the CEDAW Watch Network will advocate the integration of CEDAW in the Philippine legal framework, including the Constitution, and will monitor compliance by the Government of the Philippines of its obligations as a state party. The implementation of the Concluding Comments by the CEDAW Committee on the report of the Philippine Government will be advocated and monitored.

During its strategic planning meeting in March 2005, the founders of CEDAW Watch Network decided that, in the light of pressing issues concerning Filipino women's human rights, it will focus on the following:

1. Lobbying toward an equality law or Magna Carta for Women;
2. Public education and policy advocacy on women's right to information and women's freedom of choice particularly in relation to their reproductive health; and
3. Awareness-raising on women's human rights particularly on CEDAW.

Aurora Javate-De Dios, Executive Director of WAGI, was appointed as Convener. There are 13 founding members of the CEDAW Watch Network, including two former CEDAW Committee members and the current Chair of the CEDAW Committee, Rosario G. Manalo. Others are lawyers, women NGO leaders, and academe-based women advocates and gender experts.

Reclaiming Gender Mainstreaming

Recently, there have been disturbing developments in the name of gender mainstreaming. Development agencies have started doing away with gender focal points; gender specialists are given a wide range of responsibilities that water down their attention to gender; programs with no special concern for women are justified because with gender mainstreaming, men should now be the focus as well. Also seriously worrisome is the withdrawal of support from donors to major institutional focal points for women in the name of mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is suffering from lack of conceptual clarity and from possible misuse in the hands of those whose commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality may be suspect. At the very least, some recent moves in the name of gender mainstreaming may be premature. There is serious concern among gender advocates that gender mainstreaming must not be co-opted and wrenched away from the goals of gender equality and empowerment of women.

In the Philippine development scene, gender mainstreaming is being reclaimed. The Gender Focal Points and Advisors of bilateral and multilateral development agencies in the Philippines are engaged in initiatives to make the gender mainstreaming approach work in their respective agency programming. They have also become allies of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) in bringing gender into the negotiations or discussions on official development assistance (ODA). For the first time, the NCRFW attended the Philippine Development Forum, a meeting between the Government and its international partners to discuss and negotiate ODA, upon the endorsement of some members of the donor community. Previously not involved in such ODA meetings, the NCRFW can now flag the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda.

The ODA GAD Network has started to hold a series of discussion-study sessions in support of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in ODA in line with Philippine law requiring 5-30% of budgets of ODA-supported projects to meet the needs of the women in the sector/ population that the projects are seeking to benefit (RA 7192 Women in Development and Nation Building Act).

Gender mainstreaming initiatives have also reached the Supreme Court of the Philippines. It is no small victory for the women's movement that five laws addressing gender violence are in place. These are on sexual harassment, trafficking, and rape and violence against women and their children. The challenge now is enforcement. As part of judiciary reform, the Committee for the Gender-Responsiveness of the Judiciary (CGRJ) of the Supreme Court was created. This is an outcome attributable to early support from the UN Development Programme (UNDP) for preparing the Blue Print for Judicial Reform, where gender issues in the courts were recognized. NCRFW, on the other hand, has been responding to the Supreme Court's request for technical assistance. One of the outputs is the Gender Strategy developed by the CGRJ seeking to address the low level of representation of women in the courts particularly at the higher levels, gender insensitivity in handling of cases such as rape and domestic violence, sexual harassment of women personnel, and lack of knowledge of new laws on women's human rights.

Raising Women's Voices for UN Reform

The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document called for stronger system-wide coherence across the various agencies, funds, and programs of the

UN. In February 2006, the Secretary-General formally established a 15-member High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Environment. The Panel was expected to submit its report to the UN Secretary General in September 2006 for possible implementation in 2007.

Women's groups have mobilized around advocacy for strengthening the gender architecture of the UN. For example, Asia and the Pacific as well as Philippine women's NGOs wrote strong letters to the High-Level Coherence Panel in support of UNIFEM and against its integration into UNDP. In July 2006, the Panel held a day-long consultation with civil society representatives from around the world in Geneva. I was one of the representatives from the women's organizations and an invited speaker. The speakers as well as the rest of the participants from women's NGOs strongly expressed the need for an independent agency for women, highly positioned, well-resourced, and with field presence. In my statement, I emphasized that:

"To maintain the moral ascendancy to set norms and standards on gender equality, the UN system must model the appropriate policies and structures. Lessons from the Beijing +5 and +10 reviews point to some key characteristics needed for such institutional mechanisms to be effective, i.e.:

1. Located high enough in the structure to influence system-wide policies and to monitor implementation, exact accountability and ensure coherence and synergy of strategies/ activities for maximum results;
2. With sufficient human and financial resources to carry out its mandate; and
3. With sufficient capacity-including knowledge, skills, and tools-to implement its functions.

It is important to stress that gender mainstreaming is a tool for effective policy making at all levels and is NOT a substitute for targeted, women-specific policies, programs, and structures. Strong institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women are a requirement of gender mainstreaming."

