

Keynote Address

**“Weaving Wisdom, Confronting Crises, Forging the Future”  
Dr. Noeleen Heyzer**

*Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and  
Executive Secretary of ESCAP*

**at 2009 Asia Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15:**

*Professor Patricia Licuanan, Convener of the 2009 Asia Pacific NGO Forum on Beijing +15  
Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen*

What a joy to see a room filled with old friends and so many people dedicated to make a difference in women's lives.

But what a difference 15 years has made. Fifteen years ago, I was here in Manila organizing the first Asia Pacific NGO Forum in preparation for the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. We came out with the first Asia Pacific NGO Action Plan.

The Fourth World Conference in Beijing was seen to be one of the largest conferences on women. But it was not just a conference on women; it was the women's conference on the world, and it was driven by the Asia-Pacific women. We saw the world through women's eyes and we came up with an agenda of women's empowerment.

Let me highlight some of the achievements since Beijing, because women did not stand still after the conference. But before we celebrate our achievements, I want us to remember the hard work and struggle that led us here. For fifteen years we have worked with a wide range of partners to advance women's human rights, to empower women in an unequal region, to help women access social and economic opportunities, and to assist countries to achieve societies that are freer of violence, poverty and discrimination.

We could never have imagined when women from Asia-Pacific called on their governments to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that we would today have all but four countries in the region having ratified CEDAW.<sup>1</sup> Because of this Convention, women have full citizenship rights enshrined in the constitutions of countries like Afghanistan. Laws and policies are being adopted to strengthen women's economic security and rights in such vital areas as decent employment, and access to credit and markets. Several countries in the region such as Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia; and India, Nepal and Bangladesh in South Asia now have National Action Plans to combat violence against women.

We could never have imagined how investing in women's leadership and participation has brought about economic and social transformation in so many countries. Quotas or other affirmative measures have been adopted to increase women's representation in political decision-making in a number of countries, such as Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. We could never have imagined that Nepal, following more than 10 years of internal strife would be among the only three countries in the Asia Pacific region that have achieved the minimum 30% representation of women in national Parliaments.

Who would have imagined when we urged the UN to recognize violence against women as a human rights violation that these issues would now be addressed on national, regional and international agenda? We could never have imagined that governments in the region would introduce legislation on domestic violence and establish commissions to address violence against women. Neither could we have imagined that so much attention would be given to awareness-raising, prevention, and the role of men and boys.

These changes happened because of the unswerving commitment of millions of women and men who share a vision of more equitable societies, where daughters have the same chances as sons, where women live safe from violence, poverty and discrimination.

But we are still a long way from achieving that vision, and there is so much that must still be done. We have met every five years and the whole issue is still implementation and accountability to women. What do I mean by accountability to women? There are two essential elements to gender responsive accountability:

**First, women must be included in systems of oversight at every level:** Gender responsive accountability institutions must ensure that decision-makers answer to the women who are most affected by their decisions. This means that women must be entitled to ask for explanations and justifications – they must be legitimate participants in public debates and performance assessments.

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<sup>1</sup> All countries in the Asia Pacific region have ratified CEDAW except Iran, Nauru, Palau and Tonga.

**Second, the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment must be included in the standards against which the actions of power-holders are measured.** Power holders must answer for their performance in advancing women's rights. The standards of due diligence in holding the public trust must include gender equality as a goal of public action.

Accountability for gender equality must therefore happen on multiple fronts. It must happen in translating policies to gender responsive governance. It must happen in the delivery of public services, the playing out of market dynamics, access to justice, gender-responsive budgeting, and in international assistance for development and security.

There are obviously still many development, equality and security gaps to be addressed. Unfortunately, those gaps have to be filled in the context of the multiple threats to development and freedom – finance, climate change, disparities, and the rise of extremism. We therefore need to strengthen the accountability agenda and be aware of these multiple threats.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen

The world economy is going through an unprecedented period of uncertainty. As the economic crisis unfolds it is estimated that as many as 24.8 million people in the Asia-Pacific region could lose their jobs. Women comprise the majority of affected workers in the manufacturing sector – they constitute the majority of low-skilled workers in labour-intensive manufacturing industries, such as textiles and apparels, leather products, and electronics. Also affected are migrant workers – women form nearly two-thirds of the Asian migrant population. These are areas that traditionally lack job security and other benefits such as health care, retirement packages and retrenchment allowances. Asia-Pacific has the second highest ratio of employed women of working age in the world at 49 percent. Whether as farmers, factory workers or home-based businesspersons, women's employment is increasingly taking place at the heart of the global supply chain. Women have, in fact, emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence. As temporary, seasonal, contract laborers, women are unlikely to be covered by formal unemployment insurance or social protection schemes.

Based on the worst case scenario, ILO has estimated that an additional 9 million women in the region will become unemployed in 2009 as a result of the crisis. This would bring the total number of unemployed women in the Asia Pacific to around 38 million this year under the same scenario. Millions more will experience rising income insecurity as the impacts of the crisis to continue to be felt regionally.

Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen

Extreme climate events and natural disasters such as drought, cyclones, typhoons, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis are becoming more frequent, causing death and contributing to the destruction of crops and livelihoods. We have seen the devastation caused by the typhoons that hit our host country, the Philippines recently. I wish to extend my deep condolences to the Government and people of the Philippines for the loss of loved ones. Our prayers are with them during this difficult time of mourning, healing and reconstruction.

The number of people affected by natural disasters in our region is nearly 50 per cent more than the global average. While climate change will undoubtedly affect everyone, women are among the most highly impacted due to gender-based division of labour and existing gender inequality. Women and children are 14 times more likely to be victims of natural disasters than men in societies where gender inequalities exist, thus further challenging MDG 3 targets.

Despite these impacts, women are not just helpless victims. They are powerful agents of change and their full participation in climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and initiatives is indispensable. The upcoming climate change negotiations present an opportunity for greater participation of women in devising gender sensitive strategies.

We have five years left before the deadline for achieving the MDGs. Asia Pacific has made substantial progress in some areas. The greatest success of the region as a whole has been with freeing more than 350 million people from extreme poverty between 1990 and 2004. The region is an early achiever in reducing gender disparities in primary and tertiary education. Health has improved with more children surviving beyond the age of five. Malnutrition has fallen steadily. Many countries have achieved 100 percent net primary school enrolment. The region has also taken positive steps towards gender equality in schools and in the workplace.

However, with only five years left, many MDGs associated with women's lives are not met, especially maternal mortality. The region accounts for half of the world's maternal deaths, with 250,000 women dying each year during child birth or from pregnancy related complications. There are disturbing gender disparities and widespread discrimination against women and girls in the workplace. Asia-Pacific loses between \$42 and \$47 billion dollars a year because of restrictions on women's access to employment. Up to \$17 billion dollars a year are lost in the region due to gender gaps in education. Only 13 countries have parliaments in which more than

20% of representatives are women, with New Zealand and Nepal having the highest rate at 33.6% and 33.2% respectively.<sup>2</sup> Few countries will thus reach a critical mass of 30 percent by 2015.

I am particularly concerned about the continuing violations of women's rights. The rise of extremism in the name of culture has led to the closing of spaces for women and to an increase in violence against women. We have to fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, as well as all Security Council resolutions affecting women's lives.

What are some of the actions we can take to turn these challenges into an opportunity to advance women's economic security and rights in the region?

(i) Gender equality and women's rights must be included amongst standards against which public actions are assessed. Furthermore, women and their allies must be directly engaged in accountability and oversight processes. These include mechanisms such as consultations on national development spending priorities, committees and user group reviews of the distribution of public or natural resources.

(ii) Women need to be present at all levels of decision-making – in government, the economy, and at the community level. Setting up temporary special measures such as quotas for women at national and local government levels, on corporate boards, and in public administration is the fastest route to overcoming embedded resistance to women's leadership.

(iii) Achievement of gender equality and protection of women's human rights require governments to make appropriate allocations of resources. More emphasis needs to be placed on gender-responsive budgeting and tracking to strengthen implementation and accountability for gender equality as part of the regular budget processes. A number of countries in the Asia Pacific region made important progress in this area before the crisis – efforts are now required to ensure these gains are not lost. Equally important is insisting on strong and effective public expenditure monitoring systems to ensure that budgetary allocations reach the intended groups.

(iv) There is need to understand how gender discrimination and inequality nurture and sustain women's experience and risk of poverty, and to develop a strategy to eliminate it. Such a strategy must empower women to take advantage of employment and income opportunities in the global economy, ensure their right to own land and property, improve their access to markets and credit, provide gender-specific social services, and broaden social protection. Above all, it means recognizing and valuing the work that women do, so that development strategies will include investing in women's entrepreneurial and labour market skills rather than depending on women to pick up the social costs of market-driven growth.

(v) It is important to integrate gender perspectives within every dimension of justice and for women to participate in shaping justice frameworks and rule of law institutions in ways that promote their human rights, legal equality and inclusion. In this regard, formal and informal justice systems must address gender biases in their normative, procedural and cultural dimensions. They must also address structural and systematic injustices, such as the political, economic and social inequalities that are the frequent underlying cause of violence and conflict.

(vi) Support to women's organizing— including organizing home-based and sweatshop workers, market and cross-border traders, migrant women workers and women service providers of all kinds — is critical to create the space needed to change policy. Government and international organizations must make complementary changes so that ways of organizing the global economy recognize people as providers of unpaid care for one another and not just as producers of marketable commodities.

Women want a world in which inequality based on gender, class, caste and ethnicity is absent from every country and from the relationships among countries. Women want a world where fulfillment of basic needs becomes basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Where women's unpaid work of nurturing, caring and weaving the fabric of community will be valued and shared equally by men. Where each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity. Where progress for women is recognized as progress for all.

I hope that you will be able to come up with a visionary outcome. As Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, I will ensure that whatever outcome from this meeting will be presented at the official Beijing +15 Ministerial Review Meeting to be held in Bangkok in November 2009. I also hope that you will be able to give thought on the direction of the new gender entity for the UN.

By coming to this meeting, we have reaffirmed the women's movement in Asia Pacific once again. I have been a part of this movement for most of my adult life. The one thing I know is that it is a demanding movement. But also one that blends challenge, joy and generosity of spirit in our commitment to make the world free from want, free from fear, and free from discrimination. There is no turning back. Let us keep moving forward - I thank you!

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<sup>2</sup> IPU. 2009. Women in National Parliaments. Retrieved on 13 October 2009 from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>