

# IS THE U.N. WORTH IT?

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From October 8-11, 1994, on behalf of Isis International-Manila, I attended my first day of the **Regional Lobby Training for Asian and Pacific Women's NGOs.**

Gathered at this event were women from the Asian and Pacific regions. There was a physician and child development

specialist from Vietnam, a Japanese advocate for the rights of migrant workers in Japan, a human rights worker from Cambodia, an activist with the indigenous peoples in Thailand, a women's rights activist from Bangladesh, a worker from a church network in Pakistan, Filipinas from Hong Kong's migrant workers organizations, an activist from a Mongolian women's organization, a Sri Lankan student from the United Kingdom and several Filipinas from women's organizations in the Philippines.

We were brought together by the Asian Women's Human Rights Council (AWHRC) and the Asia-Pacific Women's Action Network (APWAN), this was the second seminar they have conducted.

For many of us this was the first time to try to get an understanding of the maze, jargon and mystique that surrounds the United Nations structure. Most importantly, it was the chance to see if this huge bureaucracy was worth taking on in promoting our particular issues. In addition, we had a concrete purpose, the **Asia-Pacific Ministerial Meeting on Social Development**, a preparatory meeting for the UN Social Summit to be held in



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Copenhagen on March 6-12, 1995, was to be held in Manila the following week. This would give us the opportunity to put into practice what we had learned.

## Experienced Lobbyists

The training gathered experienced lobbyists based in the Philippines and Malaysia to share with us their experience and expertise.

We began with **Evelyn Hong** who presented the challenges of the Social Summit and in particular spoke about the impact Structural Adjustment Programs have on developing countries economies and delivery of social programs.

**Dan O'Donnell** provided the overview of the U.N. treaties and declarations, enforcement options and possible outcomes. For example, we learned that the *Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* is a treaty so it's up to each country to implement according to local culture and religious codes. A declaration, while not legally binding can become binding, such as the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, which is now part of international law. Covenants are legally binding, such as the

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## *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.*

The Monitoring Compliance Bodies consist of the Human Rights Committee, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (also includes monitoring the trafficking of women), Committee on all Forms of Racial Discrimination, Committee Against Torture and the Committee on Rights of the Child.

Enforcement for violations are: moral and political pressure, quasi-judicial opinions, inter-state complaints, international courts and holding individuals responsible for intentional crimes.



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### **The Hands on Process**

After getting an understanding of the UN structure and system, we moved on to the actual lobbying process. The following was the main rule: **'Know the issues and know your objectives.'**

In lobbying, what you are bringing to the United Nations is the information they don't have and/or providing expertise they otherwise do not possess. The procedure and processes one uses to impart this information and expertise form the creative force in lobbying. For example, information can be presented through visuals, demonstrations, studies, use of the media, panel discussions, academic meetings and one on one interactions with the

delegates who are allies and those you want to influence.

According to *Inez Fernandez*, the main thing to keep in mind is what she called the **Four F's**. One must be **flexible, friendly**, at times **furious** and must act fast. In creating a major impact, *Nelia Sancho*, recommends that the **planning** for a strategy at the Conference be done early. **Participate** in the preparatory conferences as a way to know the agenda and continue fine tuning your plan. **Network** with other NGOs who share the same agenda. **Fundraise** for the activity and make sure the **timing** of your activities are in the time frame of the Conference.

### **But, is it all worth it?**

Is all this work worth it? Was a spoken sentiment but *Aurora de Dios*, who has been on the Philippine government side as a delegate, stated that NGOs can have a strong impact on government officials. Governments, according to her, always operate on a gut level on issues that affect their country and do not always possess the knowledge and expertise NGOs have. Patience is a virtue when working on issues at the international level, impact is felt over time and not all at once.

However, she cautioned that gains made at the international level do not mean much if they are not followed up at the local and national levels, these levels of government must be pushed if they are not moving.

After a few days of training we began our trial runs by preparing our issues for the first lobbying assignment at the Ministerial Meeting.

### **The Issues**

The group established the list of issues they wanted addressed: **migration, children's issues, health, education, indigenous peoples, comfort women, women as consumers and shelter**. On each issue a short position paper was developed and the expectation was to have them read to the delegates at the Summit meeting.

## D' Day

With our knowledge, documents, papers and pencils in hand, we merged ourselves with other NGOs and began our quest to lobby government delegates on issues we wanted addressed.

How did we fare? In a general sense maybe not bad but for the issues raised by the members of the lobby training, the following is a summary.

**Preventive health and sanitation** was not made as a strong statement in the Social Summit Ministerial final document, **alternative education programs** for women was not included, **shelter for women with special needs** did not make it, **host countries to acknowledge the nationality of children born to migrant workers** was not even discussed among the delegates, **recognition of the needs of indigenous women** was not discussed, **comfort women** were not discussed and the area of **women as consumers** was not discussed. The issue of **Structural Adjustment Programs** was very weakly addressed in the final document.

## In Hindsight

While it was apparent that many of the issues would get side-tracked, I felt that some of the responsibility was to be placed on us as NGOs and as providers of information. First of all, the women's issues were not organized as a block among the NGOs, the materials distributed did not show unity and strength. The lobbying strategy among the NGOs was not clearly articulated or disseminated among the participants, especially among the members of the lobby training group.

That's not to say that this Ministerial Meeting for the Social Summit did not represent progress for women. There are enough issues on the Agenda and commitments from governments that NGOs, especially women's groups, can hold States accountable for. But just as *Ms. De Dios* had pointed out, gains made at the international level do not mean much if they are not followed up at the national and local levels. ♀

# THE UN, DOES IT MATTER TO PACIFIC WOMEN?



In this section on the Pacific, we feature two interviews, one with *Tauga Vulaono* President of the Fiji National Council of Women and the other with *Vaine Wichman* economist and consultant to the South Pacific Commission. They discuss the impact on women, especially in the Pacific, of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, of women's involvement in UN processes, and future prospects with regard to the two forthcoming UN Conferences, the Social Summit in March in Copenhagen and the World Conference on Women in September in Beijing.