

Women and Work

Two opposing trends have emerged in recent years. On one level there is the expansion and feminisation of lower-level jobs in the service sector. On the other, there is the growing number of educated women working in high-level, higher-paid employment in both public and private sectors. These findings from the 1998-1999 World Employment Report of the International Labour Office are very telling for several reasons. Firstly, it revalidates the projections made by feminist economists that the regional financial crisis would aggravate the high-vulnerability of women to any economic shake-up. Secondly, it proves that if enabling conditions are in place, women can make significant inroads into positions of decision-making.

At the recently concluded High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action organised by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, women's NGOs and government representatives expressed concern at the continuing discriminatory practices in hiring, wages, promotion, access to training opportunities and occupational mobility. To address this alarming situation, the delegates unanimously recommended that concerted steps should be taken to counter the effects of the slowing down of job creation in many countries in the region, particularly on female labour force participation, by providing alternative avenues of employment and income generating opportunities. These efforts should include small enterprise development and new skills training schemes to upgrade women's productivity and employability and access to credit. Women activists strongly advocated that such economic opportunities not be seen only as a means of promoting national growth, but also as a means by which to strengthen women's social and economic status in society leading to their self-determination and advancement.

However, as in most UN meetings, words are easier to come by than concrete actions. At the end of the day, the onus for change is still

on women as individuals and within women's organisations. Much remains to be done in so far as promoting women's economic autonomy and decreasing the gap in the gender equation. In this issue of *Women in Action*, we have asked contributors from around the region to share with us their views on the various labour trends including telenetworking and flexibilisation of work. Moreover, we have also looked at the intertwined issues of migration and the export of labour. In so doing, we hope to be able to contribute in the continuing search for appropriate responses to mitigate the impact of the regional financial crisis and exert additional pressure on the proponents of globalisation. As feminists and as activists for social change, it is imperative that we raise our critical concern, so that it is not only our language that is incorporated into UN documents, but that our principles and strategies for women's empowerment are recognised and integrated into implementation at national, regional and international levels.

As an added feature in this issue, we have included a special section to mark Isis International's 25th anniversary. Marilee Karl, one of the founders of the oldest international women's information and communication centre, shares with us the many challenges (both personal and organisational) that came with the birthing and rearing of this organisation. Our sisters from Isis Internacional-Santiago and Isis-WICCE in Kampala along with Anne Walker of the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC), our close partner in information networking, all pitched in to guide us in this journey to the past. We invite all of you to join us in looking back at our *herstory* but more importantly, we enjoin you to contribute in charting our future as we look forward to continuing our work in women's information-sharing and communications networking in the coming years.