

The 49th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) ended on March 11, 2005 with a strong and unconditional reaffirmation by a majority of the over 1,800 government delegates from 165 countries of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and the outcome document (Beijing+5) of the 23rd Special Session of the UN General Assembly. The “Political Declaration” and the 10 resolutions that were passed during the two-week plenary meetings and small-group deliberations were made possible through the lobbying efforts and participation of over 2,600 civil society organisations and representatives from UN agencies and multilateral institutions.

The Political Declaration was approved by consensus without reservations at the end of the first week, despite the initial attempts of the United States and a few like-minded state delegations, including the Vatican, to change the language of the Beijing agreements. The Declaration commits state parties to strengthen efforts to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment through local, regional and global actions, including the pursuit of the internationally agreed on targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The UNCSW Session also underscored the need to fully integrate the human rights perspective, through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) instruments, to future policies and programmes for women.

The assessments by the different state parties of the 10-year implementation of the BPFA indicate that some progress has been achieved in narrowing the gender gap in access to primary education, basic health services, and certain sources of income. Many countries have successfully passed laws that reduce, if not eliminate, the various forms of gender discrimination as well as installed mechanisms like a national machinery for gender mainstreaming, sex-disaggregated data systems, and a gender budget to address persistent gender issues. However, the assessments also underscore the uneven progress across countries and regions in the advancement of women’s status and welfare. Many gender issues have not been successfully addressed in the last ten years, and new ones have emerged largely owing to changes in economic and political conditions.

One of the significant features of the UNCSW meeting was the presentation of global assessment papers by commissioned researchers. The UN Research Institute for Social

Development (UNRISD) presented the results of a global assessment of the impact of the BPFA on gender equality across these thematic areas: macroeconomics, well-being and gender equality; women work and social policy; women in politics and public life; and gender, armed conflict and the search for peace. Among the key findings of the assessment is the failure of many state parties and the global community to narrow the gap in access to wealth and decision-making power between and among communities and countries, more so, between males and females. The UNRISD study also asserts that the neo-liberal macroeconomic policies and programmes actively pursued by many developing countries have not provided the enabling conditions for improving women’s well-being; overcoming gender biases; and eroding gender gaps in basic capacities, opportunities and access to resources.

The papers presented by many civil society groups during the parallel nongovernment organisation forum in March 2005, also held in New York, certainly highlight the many pernicious effects of globalisation on women’s welfare and security. The participants gave evidence of how the transnational flow of labour, capital, and information has undermined women’s access to regular income, social security benefits, and state protection from labour and sexual abuse. Some participants provided information on how migrant women workers have been subjected to harsh working and living conditions, enticed into employment under false pretenses, forced into prostitution, sign fake employment contracts, or accept salaries not stipulated in the employment contract. Other participants shared more horrifying stories on the women workers’ situation.

Nonetheless, some women’s groups at the forum presented interesting approaches for enhancing women’s access and effective use of new information and communication technology to reverse the negative impact of globalisation and to address other persistent gender issues.

The vigorous enforcement of the CEDAW and the full implementation of the MDGs are expected to complete the unfinished process of promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Yet many countries have not passed the enabling laws nor have allocated resources to enforce CEDAW. Many countries need to amend their discriminatory laws and develop effective programmes to safeguard women

from emerging forms of exploitation and abuse brought about by the processes of global economic and political integration.

A serious challenge to women's groups all over the world is the need to intensify lobbying efforts to further engender the MDGs. Gender considerations must be integrated in all of the eight goals and not merely in the areas of education and health. There is a need to critique the current indicators and targets to include gender equality in access to land ownership and in control of vital capital and resources. And while laudable progress has been achieved over the past two decades in empowering poor and marginalised women to articulate their needs and interests through organising, network-building, and lobbying, still the most formidable challenge lies in engaging macroeconomic, particularly neo-liberal policies and processes. All of this must be done amid threats from groups and state parties that continue to propagate religious fundamentalist and unilateralist ideologies and practices.

Isis International-Manila provides in this issue of "*Women in Action (WIA)*" a snapshot of the efforts of women activists around the world to ensure the attainment of the BPFA's goals. While there are some achievements made, we also highlight the tasks and challenges that still lie ahead. We have articles that give assessments of the implementation of the critical areas of the BPFA at the national and regional levels, specifically in Asia and the Pacific.

Aurora Javate-de Dios, in "Revisiting the Trafficking of Women: Issues and Challenges since Beijing," describes the painstaking initiatives of women's groups in the last decade in putting the issue of trafficking of women and children at "the centre of the agenda of national governments and the international community." One of the most significant outcomes of such initiatives was the adoption of the UN "Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children." The Optional Protocol's clear definition of human trafficking can now guide the development of regional and country measures to eliminate this problem.

Jo Doezema's "Sex Worker Rights, Abolitionism, and the Possibilities for a Rights-based Approach to Trafficking," on the other hand, gives an alternative perspective to the issue

of sex trafficking and prostitution. She decries the rise of "abolitionism" and calls for a rights-based approach to trafficking. She sees the need to abandon the anti-trafficking framework, and to find a new way to "articulate the concerns shared by sex workers, anti-trafficking activists, migrants, and human rights activists."

Eileen Pittaway's "Post-Tsunami: Seizing the Moment" tells of the efforts of the NGOs from the Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW) and the Asia Pacific NGO Forum (APNGO Forum) to influence the outcome of the Beijing+10 meeting and to lobby for the strengthening of the international community's response to the needs of women and children affected by the tsunami and other kinds of natural disasters.

WIA also includes in this issue two papers that can help provide direction for moving forward the BPFA: Anne Marie Goetz's "Women's Influence on Public Policy and Governance," and Bandana Rana's "Feminist Perspectives on Media." Goetz identifies the gains and gaps in global efforts to increase women's presence and influence on politics and governance. Rana, for her part, points to the failure of many state parties and the international community to implement the BPFA actions to address the gender issues in media.

WIA's interview with Leticia Ramos Shahani, former Philippine Senator and Secretary-General of the 1985 "World Conference on Women" gives readers her articulate insights on the outcome of the BPFA and the challenges that lie ahead. Complementing this interview are interesting observations on the BPFA processes and results by some women who attended the 2005 UNCSW Session, including Everjoice J. Win, a Zimbabwean feminist activist who shares with readers her perspective on the event on her article "Beijing Minus 7 Plus 3."

The "B+10 Meets WTO+10" is a look at how a signatory to the BPFA could renege on its commitment in Beijing. The incidence of poverty in the Philippines worsened over the last ten years, and the women suffered greatly from job and food insecurities, from lower and irregular incomes as well as from higher cost of medicines and health care.

