A young woman from a fishing community in West Bengal in eastern India. She comes from a village that is known for high levels of trafficking of women and girls to other major cities.

Photo ©Anindit Roy-Chowdhury/ UN Women

The past few months have proved to be a busy time for UN Women in South Asia. July has seen the launch of Progress of The World’s Women: In Pursuit of Justice, 2011-12 - a report that chronicles women’s access to justice. India is also working even more closely with elected women representatives, and Pakistan has done some interesting work on HIV.

Beside latest news and events in this e-newsletter, we would like to introduce a new section called Stories of Change to showcase specific work across South Asia. In tune with the theme of the Progress report, we focus on access to justice in this issue.

Please do send your feedback to registry.india@unwomen.org. Download the e-newsletter from our new website www.unwomensouthasia.org.
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STORIES OF CHANGE: ACCESS TO JUSTICE

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UN Women released its first flagship report, “Progress of the World’s Women: In Pursuit of Justice 2011-12,” recognizing progress in India and South Asia, and calling on governments to take action to end the injustices that keep women poorer and less powerful than men.

At the official South Asia media launch in New Delhi on 7 July 2011, UN Women Assistant Secretary General Lakshmi Puri and Deputy Regional Program Director Sushma Kapoor unveiled the report along with reputed lawyers from across South Asia including Indira Jaising from India, Constituent Assembly member Sapana Pradhan Malla from Nepal, and Justice Sultana Kamal from Bangladesh.

Touching on issues ranging from gender-based violence to unequal pay and from female participation in government to the cost of seeking justice, the report provides evidence on all aspects of women’s access to justice. “Almost all countries in South Asia now ensure gender equality in their constitutions. There are, however, areas where women continue to experience injustice, violence and inequality in their home and working lives. For example, domestic violence is recognized as a crime in only four countries of South Asia, leaving millions of women vulnerable to such violence,” said Lakshmi Puri.

Others felt that a lack of accountability was the problem. “There is a gap in the law and its implementation. The problem stems from the lack of accountability of public servants. We must hold public servants responsible for inaction,” said Ms. Indira Jaising.

The report highlights how laws have made a difference in South Asia. Nepal is one of only two countries in the region that has legislation in place against marital rape. Reservation for women in Nepal’s Constituent Assembly has helped to usher in other pro-women legislation. “Laws give us the chance to protect those who are suffering. But we need to change mindsets. Just having a law is not enough,” said Ms. Malla.

Talking about the challenges faced by women’s rights activists...
“Laws give us the chance to protect those who are suffering. But we need to change mindsets. Just having a law is not enough,”

Sapana Pradhan Malla

in Pakistan, Ms. Hina Jilani said that turning the victim into the accused has stopped in Pakistan. “While the situation has changed to some extent, our judiciary still needs to be gender sensitive. There is no need for pessimism, those who have the energy to fight can continue to create change,” she said.

Following the press conference, a technical panel discussion was chaired by the ex-Chief Justice of India, Justice J. S. Verma, who had pronounced the landmark Vishaka judgment, on the basis of which the Sexual Harassment bill was drafted in India. “The Vishaka judgment didn’t happen overnight. Mindsets require changes that are accompanied by changes in the law. Interpretation and sensitivity of the law is important,” stressed Justice Verma.

The report highlights that employing women on the front line of justice service delivery can help increase women’s access to justice. Even the presence of women police officers helps increase reporting of cases of sexual assault. Yet women comprise only 3 percent of judges in India.

“There is an urgent need to transform our legal system. We currently see low conviction and high attrition rates of cases pertaining to women’s rights, especially in cases of sexual assault. We need to find innovative solutions to address this, such as one-stop shops,” stressed Ms. Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary General UN Women.

Supporting women’s legal organizations and using quotas to boost the number of women legislators are amongst the ten recommendations highlighted in the report to make justice system work for women.

At 13, she had acid thrown in her face. Now many years later, the young acid survivor spoke of her experiences in an audio message at the launch of the Progress of the World's Women Report in Pakistan. This young woman fought for justice taking her case all the way to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. She succeeded in having the judgment of the lower court reversed, and securing the maximum punishment for the perpetrator. The Supreme Court ruling even created a legal precedent to lobby for a strong Acid Attack bill in Pakistan.

Her audio message was one of the highlights of the report launch in Islamabad on 29 July. Unveiling the report in the presence of policy makers, donors and civil society partners, Dr. Fehmida Mirza, Speaker of the National Assembly, and the first woman Speaker in the Muslim world made a strong case for women in legislation. “It is high time that we make our society realize that gender roles, inequalities and power imbalances are not a ‘natural’ result of biological differences, but determined by the systems and cultures in which we live. The same can be changed if we seek social change,” she said.

She spoke about her proposal for the creation of a Parliament for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that could allow parliamentarians of the region to jointly address issues of social injustice, speed up progress on the Millennium Development Goals and create a gender balanced community.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Yousaf Raza Gilani also extended his support to UN Women. In a recorded video message, he said: “Pakistan is on the Executive Board of UN Women as a sign of its commitment to gender equality and women's rights in Pakistan and around the world.” He further added that the ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by Pakistan in 1996, and its devolution at the provincial level and local levels were signs of this commitment.

Mr. Zia Awan, a prominent lawyer and human rights activist brought in the challenge of ‘parallel legal systems’ faced by traditional societies such as Pakistan. While Mr. Ehsan Sadiq, the Assistant Inspector General of the Islamabad Police, stressed the need to build capacity of the police force on laws friendly to women; Musarat Hilaly, the first woman ombudsperson in Pakistan, spoke of the work her office is doing to deliver justice to the women.

This was followed by an interesting panel discussion that brought together police officers and doctors to find solutions to speed up access to justice for women in Pakistan. Station House Officers Khalid and Sadaq Iqbal; Dr. Arshad, the Chief Medical Officer of a major government hospital; Mr. Jehangir Jadoon, a Barrister representing the legal fraternity; and Ms. Saima, a clinical psychologist representing one of the most influential NGOs working on women's issues in the country, took pertinent questions from the audience.

Led by the Speaker of the National Assembly, Dr. Fehmida Mirza, the participants took turns signing UN Women’s Empowerment Wall, thereby resolving to become agents of change.
UN Women Forges Ahead to Empower Women Leaders in India

A single, Dalit woman from the tribal Gajpati district in Odisha, Sochara Karzi has made great strides since her appointment as a sarpanch (head of village council). She has ensured that almost 4000 farmers got free maize seeds, 200 people received jobs cards under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 500 acres of land were planted with mango trees, 3000 people gained access to fresh drinking water and 200 people received pension under the government’s old age pension scheme.

Leadership by women like Karzi is made possible because 33 percent of seats have been reserved for women in village-level local governments in all the states of India. Recently the State Government has enacted a law reserving at least 50 percent of the seats for women. Although women like Karzi are coming forward to participate in political affairs at all levels of governance, they face many challenges. There is a need to reform unsupportive laws, reduce the threat of violence against women in politics, address lack of economic empowerment, and change the patriarchal attitudes and culture which discourage them from contesting elections.

In response to these challenges, UN Women signed an agreement with the Government of Odisha in July to strengthen equal political participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (local decision-making councils) of Odisha.

The programme, Promoting Women’s Political Leadership and Governance, will be implemented in the districts of Gajapati and Dhenkanal. Signing the agreement, Mr. Maheshwar Mohanty, Minister, Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha, underscored the importance of training elected women representatives. “Till now the State Institute for Rural Development (SIRD) has trained 94,000 women, and in the forthcoming elections next year we need to see the impact of this training, as it helps in changing behaviors,” he said.

The Odisha Government’s Department of Panchayati Raj and UN Women will work together to ensure that women candidates, after having won local elections, are aware of their power and rights. Through the project, “motivators” will encourage women to attend village council meetings and discuss their concerns. “Undoubtedly, these discussions will bring forth solutions that improve the quality of life of women,” said Ms. Sushma Kapoor, UN Women’s acting Regional Programme Director. “The powers of Panchayati Raj Institutions will be used to make government agencies more accountable.”

Besides Odisha, UN Women and its partners are working in the states of Karnataka, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to assist women in village councils and encourage them to become more vocal as leaders in Panchayats (local governance councils). This in turn helps them assert themselves on a variety of issues like violence against women, and local budgets and plans.

Leading by example, Karzi does just that.

“Becoming a woman sarpanch (head of village council) has built my confidence to talk up, to work, to get things done and discuss issues with officials from all over,” asserts Karzi.
Junpo Jugli is the Chairperson of the Changlang Zilla Parishad (District Committee) in Arunachal Pradesh and has been elected for almost a decade. In 2006, intense pressure by senior officials could not make her back down.

For her leadership and determination, Junpo was conferred the Outstanding Panchayat Leader Award of 2011 during the 18th Women Political Empowerment Day celebrations in New Delhi on 25 April 2011. UN Women supported these celebrations along with the Institute of Social Sciences to encourage more women like Junpo to come forward and make a change.

UN Women has also signed an agreement with the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration to train officials on gender issues. 30 officials of the Indian Administrative Service, the police and the army were trained on gender equality in the first of a series of trainings in Mussoorie.

Photo © Gagan Singh Chandok/ UN Women

A Resource Centre for Women Parliamentarians in Afghanistan

Coming out of a 30-year old civil war, Afghan women now make up for 27 percent of representatives in the Parliament. Soon, they will be able to become stronger leaders thanks to a resource centre on their parliament premises.

The Afghanistan National Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to women’s leadership by signing an agreement with UN Women in July to establish this Resource Centre. Along with National Parliament and Civil Society, UN Women will provide women parliamentarians with internet as well as advisory services on gender and legislation. Interactive briefing sessions will enhance their skills and capacity to perform legislative and oversight abilities, making their contribution visible to the public.

This will build on an earlier Resource Centre established by UN Women outside the Parliament premises. This centre has helped to promote interaction between female parliamentarians, provincial council members and civil society actors.

Photo © UN Women
Making Women Count in Nepal

From March to July 2011, common people heard more about the Nepal Population and Housing Census 2011 thanks to widespread media coverage. UN Women worked with the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) to plan and implement the media campaign and highlight the importance of being counted in the Census. Conducting interviews for local TV channels and radio stations, developing media messages, conducting training for master trainers, and organizing round-tables were some of the ways in which this was done.

A New Partnership to Address HIV in Pakistan

UN Women and the National AIDS Control Programme in Pakistan have entered into an agreement to address the needs of women affected and infected by HIV in the country. Signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UN Women, Mr. Amir Maqbool, Acting National Programme Manager, National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) said that the cooperation will enhance capacities and improve coordination between the National Programme and the Joint United Nations Team on HIV and AIDS.

Addressing violence against women infected and affected by HIV and improving overall capacity are two ways in which the agreement will implement national commitments on gender equality. “This MoU will lay a concrete way for joint interventions to address HIV and AIDS epidemic under this agreement,” said Ms. Nayab, Gender Advisor, NACP. UN Women will also provide technical assistance to reinforce gender concerns in the National Strategic Framework.

Bankers Learn About Credit for Women in India

Women have credit needs, and often these are ignored by the banking systems. In a first of its kind in India, UN Women along with the Indian College of Agricultural Banking and the Reserve Bank of India conducted trainings to help bankers understand the credit needs of women. After the trainings, bankers knew more about the challenges that hamper women’s access to financial services. They also came away with different attitudes when dealing with women clients. Three trainings have been conducted so far, in December 2010, April and July 2011.

Promoting Time Use Surveys

40 economists from South Asia, Africa, America, Europe and South East Asia came together in New Delhi in April with one objective - to harmonize time use surveys. They examined various methods of conducting these surveys and promote them to ensure gender equality. Organized by the Centre for Development Alternatives, Indian Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation and UN Women, the conference was a meeting ground for economists who stressed the need for adequate capacities and illustration of the utility of time use statistics. The Indian Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation will now conduct an All India Time Use Survey in 2011-2012.
Two weeks. Five countries. One pivotal question: What should UN Women do differently in the coming years?

Almost 13 consultations were organized by UN Women in South Asia to draw inputs from partners on its unique niche in the region. Activists, government counterparts and donors across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka answered this question adding their unique perspectives. While in Bangladesh, they wanted UN Women to have a wider mandate to work on gender equality, in India they requested UN Women to focus on a specific niche.

Seen as a big opportunity to start afresh, partners in Nepal stressed the need for UN Women to support the national government to implement treaties, obligations and conventions. Besides a national consultation in Kathmandu, UN Women in Nepal also organized meetings in four other districts – Dhanusha, Kapilvastu, Mahottari and Morang.

Regardless of differences in views or opinions, participants across all countries unanimously echoed the need for change and for UN Women to be at the centre of it. In Peshawar, Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi, ‘change’ was the buzzword. Everyone from government ministries, non-government, academia, media, religious scholars, lawyers and UN Agencies were quick to support it. They saw UN Women as an agent of change for progressive and independent women, leading the way for gender equality.

A representative of the Government of India urged UN Women to make violence against women a huge priority in the Indian sub-continent. “We need to look at the entire gamut of issues - is the legislation adequate? Are there minimum standards of care and adequate supports services? Can we change mindsets especially that of boys and men? In all of this, UN Women has a lead role to play in partnership with the Ministry,” said Vinita Agarwal, Director, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India.

As one of the biggest donors to UN Women, the Royal Government of Norway gave a clear message to UN Women in the region. “UN Women cannot be doing everything for everybody. It needs to carve out a niche and be good at it. Focus is essential and UN Women should concentrate on Women’s Empowerment (political) and Women, Peace and Security (including VAW),” cautioned Mr. Aslak, Counsellor, Royal Norwegian Embassy, India.

In Sri Lanka, the absence of a UN Women office did not deter women activists and they voiced their concerns with passion and clarity. They asserted that UN Women should play a greater role to ensure that the Government of Sri Lanka is aware of its international obligations and held accountable by using international conventions such as CEDAW.
“My husband raped me almost every day,” describes a woman from Nepal’s Makwanpur district, one of the regions most affected by HIV and AIDS. “He had the misconception that it was his right to have sex with his wife whenever he wanted to.”

This story is not an isolated one. According to the National Centre for AIDS and STD Control in Nepal, housewives constitute 74% of the total reported cases of HIV among women—a large number of them are also spouses of migrant workers or wives of clients to sex workers.

In 2006, Equal Access, with the support of a three-year grant from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, launched the radio programme Samajhdari in Nepal to increase awareness, connect people to appropriate services and encourage community action. Nepali for “mutual understanding”, Samajhdari reached more than a million listeners weekly since it began in 2006, sparking public discussions on violence against women.

For one woman from Makwanpur, Samajhdari changed her life. “After I started listening to Samajhdari, I encouraged my husband to listen to the programme,” she said. “Since then, his behavior has changed and he realizes that what he did in the past was violence against me.”

The Most Understanding Husband Campaign was launched to encourage men to take responsibility for their actions. Through radio and community outreach, the campaign invited men to share how they put mutual understanding into practice. Since the campaigns, the number of women seeking legal help has more than doubled in the project areas and the number of men supporting interventions to end violence against women has increased five-fold.
“CEDAW needs the support of the religious community”.
Hayatullah Jawad, Afghanistan

“This training helped me understand that CEDAW does not have to conflict with Islam. This has been the government’s excuse on their failure to implement certain guidelines”
Nasheeth Thoha, Maldives

Making the Convention Work for South Asia

When Saifora Barekzai chose to attend the training of trainers on the Convention for Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), she did so with a clear objective in mind. “I wanted to learn how to implement CEDAW on a practical level. Afghanistan has ratified CEDAW but there are great problems with implementation,” she says. Through the training she has learnt valuable techniques for creating awareness and bring about practical change.

Saifora and 29 other government officials, human rights activists and NGO professionals from across South Asia who took part in the CEDAW Regional Training of Trainers in New Delhi in July went away with similar insights for their own countries. Organised by the Partners for Law in Development (PLD) and UN Women, the training has inspired people and improved understanding about the Convention in different ways.

Ganga Thapa, from the Protection Desk in Kathmandu, will use the information gained from the workshop to monitor whether regional officers are meeting their obligations. Deki Dema from Bhutan has learnt about the different types of equality, both formal and substantive. “The use of films has helped me visualise ways to create change in my region. It has been interesting to meet people from all over Asia. I have heard different points of view,” says Deki who works with Bhutan’s National Commission for Women and Children.

Others went away inspired by learnings on gender equality. “This training helped me understand that CEDAW does not have to conflict with Islam. This has been the government’s excuse on their failure to implement certain guidelines,” reflected Nasheeth Thoha from the Maldivian Democracy Network, a human rights organization.

Much like Nasheeth, Hayatullah Jawad from the Afghanistan Human Rights Research and Advocacy Organisation has learnt how to bring CEDAW and Islamic principles together
in a conservative Afghani society. "CEDAW needs the support of the religious community," he says. He now hopes to go back and establish a network of women's rights groups, using the research conducted by his organization.

On returning to the Odisha state in India, Mamata Taipathy, who works for Centre for Youth & Social Development (CYSD), hopes to create a training programme to educate other staff on the importance of CEDAW. "Currently 70 percent of the senior representatives are men, especially the board members. I want this to change to become a fairer and more gender balanced working environment," she says.

Deki is optimistic about the future for Bhutanese women, but she knows there is still a long way to go. She hopes to create change by increasing awareness in hard to reach areas in Bhutan.

Ganga will also use her training to make women and girls aware of their rights. "A lot of girls are mistreated by their families," she says. "Many are unaware that the treatment they are receiving is wrong, since they have grown up thinking that it is right because it is socially acceptable," she says.

Helping Women Migrate Safely in Bangladesh

Ismat Ara from Rongpur, Bangladesh is only 23 years old but she has already experienced far more than her young age. The agricultural work she did could not sustain her three children, so she decided to work abroad as a domestic helper.

After she sold her land to generate the 70,000 taka needed to travel to Dubai, she realized that the middleman, Shelim had duped her. She, along with 10 other women, stood at Dubai airport, stranded for days. Helpless and desperate, they took up a man's offer of work, only to be sent to a house where he locked her in a room for 5 days without any food or water. After protesting, she was sent back to Dhaka without any of her paperwork.

Today, Ismat works as a domestic help in Dhaka, trying to pay off the debt she has incurred. Through support from UN Women and its civil society partner OKUP, Ismat is working towards rebuilding her life.

To ensure that other women don’t go through Ismat’s fate, UN Women helped the Government of Bangladesh in 2010 to establish its first resource centre so women migrants could easily obtain correct information.

Workshops and radio broadcasts have made women more aware of their rights. A 26-episode programme in local dialects was broadcast on national radio to inform potential women migrant workers of the safest ways to migrate abroad to work. After receiving an overwhelming audience response from women migrant who called in with queries, the programme, that was produced and broadcast by UN Women, is now being replicated for seven other local stations across the country.

Government officials, including those in embassies in countries receiving migrants, have learnt to better assist women migrants who encounter difficulties. For women who must return to Bangladesh, the Government is working on a policy on rehabilitation in close partnership with UN Women and women's rights advocates.

For any queries, please contact sabrina.sidhu@unwomen.org. All photos are copyright of UN Women, unless indicated otherwise.