UNIFEM and Beijing

The Fourth World Conference (FWCW) held in September 1995, where nearly 40,000 participants gathered was special for a host of reasons - the strength and intensity of mobilization; the sheer sweep of issues covered; the large numbers who fought and kept vigil over every paragraph, every sentence and every word of the Declaration and the Platform for Action (PFA); the acrimony and debate which preceded the consensus; all of this and much more made the Beijing Conference what it was. Having achieved a progressive and forward-looking framework, the participating governments pledged to work towards implementing the PFA to ensure that women in their respective countries achieve equality, development and peace.

For UNIFEM which was born out of the women’s movement in 1976 as the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women, the most important message from the FWCW was that of accountability of all actors, all agencies and all governments to the women of the world.

The journey from Beijing has been marked by unparalleled opportunities for stimulating dialogues, partnerships and collective introspection. In the process to Beijing, at Beijing itself and in the Post-Beijing period, UNIFEM has played a crucial role. Much effort was made to disseminate information about the FWCW, to open channels of communication among women’s groups and create networks, to collect gender-related statistics, and to sensitise government delegates, officials and journalists to gender issues.

In the South Asia region, a tremendous momentum of government and NGO partnership was created, building structures to facilitate the process to Beijing. A most dramatic mobilization of women from all walks of life was witnessed, owing its origins to the richness of the women’s movement and to the spirit in which the government and the movement continuously interacted with each other.

UNIFEM played a key role in bringing partners together, and has been associated with the process of carrying the voices of grassroots women to Beijing. Significantly the South Asian Countries were amongst the foremost in making their pledges to the PFA both as members of a sub-regional group and as individual countries.
South Asia Biennial Review Meetings — Facilitating the translation of rhetoric into transformative action

The South Asia region has been witness to a unique accountability mechanism. Governments and civil society have very successfully deployed regional review mechanisms, as a strategy to address the BPFA and CEDAW. These participatory and transparent review meetings between Governments and women's groups have entailed a process of introspection, gap identification, addressing challenges and developing a common South Asia agenda of priorities for action. In addition this process has successfully facilitated cross regional peer learning and sharing of best practices.

UNIFEM with its excellent track record in strengthening women’s organizations and networks and linking them with decision makers undertook the responsibility to play a facilitating role in reaffirming and strengthening the accountability mechanisms in South Asian governments - to take stock of how the region has redeemed the pledges made; what they have lived up to and where the gaps remain. In this regard UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office has instituted a mechanism of ministerial - level biennial regional reviews. Through collaborative regional dialogue and discussion, governments, NGOs, the SAARC secretariat, gender experts, key regional institutions and UN agencies collectively assess critical issues concerning women’s empowerment.

This tracking is specially designed to allow for collective introspection, enabling all stakeholders to critique regional challenges and gaps, and formulate future strategies in keeping with
UNIFEM’s mandate of negotiating spaces for women and articulating women’s voices in designing policy and setting priorities and goals.

**Salient Features of the Biennial Review — *Fostering coherence of effort, collaboration and cooperation***

- Forging new synergies and effective partnerships between women’s organizations, governments, the UN system and the private sector
- Fostering networks and linkages that contribute to women’s empowerment and gender equality, policy reform and gender-sensitive development
- Building stronger women’s organizations and networks so that women themselves have the power to negotiate new and better policies with their governments and international agencies
- Exchanging regional experiences, establishing priorities and assessing future directions
- Feedback process of pioneering, learning, information sharing and advocacy
- Reporting system that can capture the positive and negative lessons, so that best practices can be disseminated and replicated and ineffective practices avoided
- Building an operational knowledge base that documents ways and means of empowering women, which is accessible to other stakeholders in the development process
• New forms of synergy between diverse sectors
• Providing an equal space to Civil Society to have an interface with Governments
• Positive competition and pressure to replicate effective policies and reforms
• Guiding and mandating UNIFEM regarding its work in the region

**First Biennial Review — Accountability to the World’s Women**

UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office organised the first South Asia Regional Review on the first anniversary of Beijing in September 1996, in New Delhi, which was inaugurated by H.E. Najma Heptullah, Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha, India. This first post-Beijing regional meeting acted as a barometer to gauge and assess the achievements made on the implementation of the PFA and the Beijing Declaration by national governments and the NGO community. The meeting’s main objective was to facilitate a participatory and collaborative regional policy dialogue on the issues of women’s empowerment, and to share experiences and perspectives. Taking stock of the achievements, challenges and lacunae, the meeting explored possibilities of ensuring continuity mainstreaming and co-ordination.

A free and frank dialogue was facilitated on the issue of women’s empowerment in the region and the delegates shared a range of information on mechanisms used for Beijing follow-up activities, strategies planned and researches and policy formulations undertaken by their respective countries.
The meeting put forth some concrete regional collaborative plans for future. One of them was to declare 1997 as the year of action for gender equality and also to set up a regional network called “NGO-SAARC Women for Peace.”

**Highlights of the recommendations**

- Scientific assessment of women’s contribution to the economy through gender disaggregated data to be reported to the SAARC Secretariat
- National and regional studies on the structural adjustment policy safety nets
- Develop effective regional cooperation to eradicate trafficking of women and girls
- Combine efforts in all countries in the region for regional advocacy on home based workers in line with the ILO Convention
- Develop communication strategy for sharing experiences in the region
- Develop monitoring and implementing mechanisms for capacity building on gender in the region
- Form regional self-help groups / consortium of entrepreneurs
- Conduct regular dialogues on post Beijing activities in the region
- Consensus to form a NGO-SAARC Women for Peace

At the end of the meeting there was a consensus that such a collective regional stocktaking added stimulus and provided space to the regional women’s movement. It was unanimously proposed that UNIFEM make this a biennial two day event.
Second Biennial Review

The second biennial review was jointly organised by His Majesty's Government of Nepal and UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office, on 9-10 September 1998, at Kathmandu, Nepal and was inaugurated by H.E. Shailaja Acharya, Deputy Prime Minister of Nepal. The two-day meeting was a collective introspection evaluating the implementation of the PFA in the region and strategizing for the future through a frank and participatory analysis. Networking and inter-regional collaborations were facilitated towards the implementation of the PFA with an emphasis on the critical areas of concern.

“If Beijing has posted the signposts for achieving the goals enumerated in the PFA, regular regional reviews such as this one are of crucial importance for monitoring progress and defining strategies.”

H. E. Mr. Nihal Rodrigo, Secretary General, SAARC
Highlights of Kathmandu Forward Looking Strategies:

Recommendations for different actors

SAARC
- Reorienting the role of its technical committee on women
- Prepare gender-disaggregated data base
- Disseminate information on the SAARC Convention on Trafficking

UNIFEM
- Strengthen NGO-SAARC Women for Peace
- Network to take forward the agenda on violence against women, for advocacy

UN Agencies
- Organize a system for gender audit

Women’s Network
- Activate itself in advocacy and information dissemination
- Advocate and lobby for the ratification of the ILO Convention on Home Based Workers
- Advocate and lobby for the ratification of the Convention on Migrant Workers and their Families 1990
- Transparency in the process of CEDAW report preparation
- Facilitate the use of CEDAW to draft legislation and to interpret national legislation

National Government
- Monitoring implementation of greater political participation and sending of reports to SAARC Committee
Third Biennial Review

The Third Biennial review was held in September 2001 at Bandos Island, in partnership with the Government of Maldives. This meeting was inaugurated by H. E. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives. The meeting extensively discussed key priorities, challenges and recommendations. Separate working groups identified concerns, developed a list of critical issues and incorporated it into a comprehensive and common regional framework entitled ‘Maldives Foreword Moving Strategies’.

Highlights of Maldives Forward Moving Strategies

On the basis of the analysis of achievements, shortfalls and challenges, the following priority concerns were identified.

Trafficking

• Re-examine the SAARC Convention on trafficking with a view to expand the definition of trafficking and give the Convention a rights based perspective
• Set up inter-ministerial anti-trafficking mechanism/cells/secretariat
• Train immigration and border police etc

Information Sharing

• Share best practices from the region on advances in information

"Gender equality and the empowerment of women would, in my view, constitute some of the finest achievements of humanity. Nothing hurts more than injustice. Nothing is more unjust than the denial of equality among human beings. How can we deny for one-half of humanity those rights and opportunities that are enjoyed by the other half?"

H. E. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives
technology, micro-credit etc on an ongoing basis - in terms of the extent to which they are furthering women’s rights

- Share information on laws relating to VAW, personal laws regarding inheritance, property and marriage
- Share information on the challenges of globalisation and poverty eradication strategies/programmes in different countries

Monitoring of progress on the implementation of CEDAW and PFA

- Pursuing the development of expertise in this area will be a regional priority

Gender Budget and Gender Audit

- Development of expertise in this area will be a regional priority

Creating monitoring mechanism within countries

- Set up a high powered monitoring committee in each country to review the progress of implementation of CEDAW and PFA

Political Participation

- Create a ten-point manifesto for women representing a shared political agenda

National Women’s Machinery

- Work towards the transformation of the national women’s ministries/ departments from project implementation mechanisms to catalysts that bring about policy changes and law reforms

“Trafficking must be removed from the domain of crime prevention and treated as a human rights issue. I would like to thank UNIFEM for organising such an excellent workshop and for giving me the opportunity to be briefed on the issues of the region.”

Radhika Coomaraswamy, UNSpecial Rapportuer on VAW
At the Maldives meeting it was decided that the next meeting will focus on:

- Developing indicators for measuring implementation of CEDAW and PFA
- Preventing trafficking of women and girls

UNIFEM was requested to support and facilitate the entire process. The meeting gave a call for observing the year 2001 as the Year for the Empowerment of Women.

The Maldives meeting was exceptional in the sense that during the meeting a special workshop on CEDAW and a special session focusing on trafficking in women and children was also organised.

The Fourth Biennial Review

The Fourth South Asia Regional Meeting was held in Paro, Bhutan from 19 to 21st May 2003, jointly by the Royal Government of Bhutan and UNIFEM. The consensus arrived at in Bhutan, in the shape of the "Bhutan Forward Moving Strategies 2003 - Accelerating Actions and Results" charts out regional priorities for future action.

Highlights of the Recommendations of the Bhutan Forward Moving Strategies

- Accelerate actions to address the main determinants of persistent gender inequalities such as illiteracy, deprivation and stereotypical socialization patterns and adverse cultural practices
- Hasten ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW
• Strengthen support services for victims of gender-based violence

• Upon ratification, re-examine the Convention on Trafficking on Women and Children to expand its scope using a right based approach

• Initiate legal reforms to comply with the SAARC Convention on trafficking and promote technical exchanges

• Support processes to engender global trade agreements and treaties

• Support efforts to promote policies and institutions, which give women especially rural women, ownership and access to economic resources, assets, capacity building and social security

• Continue to strengthen the networks of women in the informal sector

“Most importantly there is a need to foster political will to accept gender equality, which continues to be one of the greatest challenges in South Asia”.

Sapana Malla, Director FWLD, Nepal
• To take forward the processes towards gender sensitive governance by developing and applying tools such as gender analysis of budgets, gender audit and engaged planning and monitoring at the national and local levels

• Create mechanisms to increase women’s access to media and communication technology and support the training of media personnel to eliminate gender bias in reporting

• Set up a network for facilitating documentation of best practices and sharing of knowledge, especially for the development of monitoring indicators, gender analysis of budgets, violence against women, women’s political participation and gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS

• Strengthen the capacity of women’s ministries/departments/committees and shift their focus from project implementations towards formulation of gender sensitive policy, advocacy and monitoring

• Continue regional bi-annual meetings of relevant ministries, NGOs and women’s groups to review progress in the implementation of CEDAW and BPFA to be facilitated by UNIFEM

• Encourage close collaboration between SAARC and UNIFEM towards ratification and implementation of the SAARC Convention on Trafficking of Women and Children

• UNIFEM was requested to support and facilitate the entire process including the priorities and institutional framework
Linking the Biennial Review with CEDAW

UNIFEM plays an important brokering role by bringing together the expertise and knowledge available in a country including members of the CEDAW Committee itself, government representatives and NGOs. This has increased the capacity of all parties to understand their respective roles and obligations on reporting and implementation of the Convention.

Major Regional Initiatives — Tangible demonstration of the region’s response towards gender equality

- Advanced political commitments to gender equality and women’s rights in the region through enhanced and pro-active involvement of the SAARC Secretariat demonstrated through the Memorandum of Understanding between SAARC and UNIFEM
- Bringing the issue of trafficking of women and children to the fore - the SAARC Convention on trafficking of women and children; a region-wide comprehensive programming for anti-trafficking; development of first ever comprehensive data base; establishment of regional and national resource centres
- Regional campaign on violence against women to change mindsets, involving multiple stakeholders especially

“Unlike the clearly specified role that UNICEF has been given in the CRC, UNIFEM does not have a formal role specified in the convention (CEDAW) as such. However UNIFEM has helped catalyse the agenda of women’s rights and is therefore an integral part of the Convention. The time is ripe to formalize UNIFEM’s role in the CEDAW process as UNICEF facilitates the implementation of CRC”.

(Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, CEDAW Committee Member)

“A lesson learned by the government is the importance of involving NGOs from an early stage in the CEDAW reporting process. The report would have significantly been better if NGOs had been involve right from the beginning.”

Mr. Tirtha Man Shakya, Chief Secretary of HMG of Nepal
youth and men and using innovative methods and mediums to break the silence

- Formulation of national plans and strategies for the empowerment of women

- Engendering of the Census leading to the increased recording of women’s workforce participation and lifting the cloak of invisibility on women’s work

- Use of gender analysis of budgets as a tool for gender audit

- Created an enabling environment for enhancing economic security of women by addressing critical issues of migrant, home based workers as well as women in the informal sector

- Lobbied for the amendment of discriminatory laws and the enactment of new laws regarding migration, domestic violence, citizenship and trafficking

- Enhanced understanding of governments, UN system and civil society on the gender dimensions of the HIV/AIDS pandemic

- Catalysed unique networks in the region - Positive Women’s Network, South Asia Forum Against Trafficking, South Asian Professionals Against Trafficking, South Asian Women Entrepreneurs, Network of Feminist Economists, NGO-SAARC Women for Peace
• Initiated dialogue on the linkages between BPFA, CEDAW, MDGs and Resolution 1325

Over the last few years, governments and civil society in the region have learnt that progress depends on the ability to build on each others experiences and learn from each effort and initiative. These unique biennial reviews have greatly contributed to regional learning, collective thinking and joint strategising to keep the Beijing Torch Alive. Global and regional debates and events take place with much fanfare but are forgotten once the event is over. However, the South Asian Region has been able to develop and sustain an innovative mechanism to enhance accountability to women of the region so that men and women can turn hope into reality, have the opportunity to reach their full potential and truly live lives free of discrimination.

“In the past few years, there has been a greater partnership between NGOs and the Ministry. The Ministry has been receptive to NGO views and has worked (with them) in producing a combined report for B+5...At the community level, a lot of activities were done in partnership with the Ministry and the NGOs...”

Ms. Bandana Rana, President, Sancharika Samuha, Nepal
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