

Structural Barriers, Cultural Constraints, Meso Traps & Other Challenges  
Women's Empowerment  
in Institutional Mechanisms and Power & Decision-Making  
The Beijing Platform for Action 15 Years On

Briefing Paper for

Expert Group Meeting in Preparation for the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting  
on the Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action UN ESCAP  
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Farida Shaheed

## General Concerns & Recommendations

The comprehensive agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action is the result of two decades of tri-partite strategic thinking and negotiation that brought together civil society women's rights advocates, the United Nations system and governments. An overriding concern, therefore, is that the concentration of efforts and financial support for the Millennium Development Goals, the UN Aids Effectiveness and other major international initiatives have shifted the focus away from the Platform as a basic reference document for women's empowerment. In 2005, the UN Commission on the Status of Women noted the "need to integrate a gender perspective in the implementation and review of the Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals."<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, women's organizations expressed concern that the performance of service delivery approach of MDG-focused processes were displacing the human rights oriented Platform and, further, that there was insufficient follow up on commitments made in the Platform for action on macro-economic policies and plans.<sup>3</sup> It is thus far from reassuring that in 2009 "some of the modalities and principles adopted by the One UN pilots are increasing barriers to effective participation of national partners working on gender equality", that is civil society actors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws some of its points from the thinking, research findings and discussions of the Research Programme Consortium, Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: gender, poverty and democratization from the inside out, led by SEARC, City University, Hong Kong. See [www.wemc.com.hk](http://www.wemc.com.hk).

<sup>2</sup> 48<sup>th</sup> Session: Press Release WOM/1447, [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1447.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1447.doc.htm) 03.29.04

<sup>3</sup> *Macroeconomic decision-making jeopardizing implementation of the Beijing Platform - Statement to the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, February 28-March 11, 2005 in New York* Endorsed by: International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), International Gender & Trade Network, Secretariat (IGTN), Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG), Public Services International (PSI), Network Women in Development Europe (WIDE), Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO), Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ)

<sup>4</sup> *Delivering as One on Gender – UN Retreat, Hanoi, November 2008*, power point presentation at CSW Meeting Tuesday 3 March 2009; slide 8.

The relative lack of attention to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is reflected in the paucity of reports on progress made since the ten year review in 2005 on any of the specific areas of concern in the Platform. At least, I found it extremely difficult to find collated or comparative information on the Asia Pacific on either institutional mechanisms or power and decision-making; more current data had to be gleaned from other reports concerning for example, Aid Effectiveness and MDGs. Equally disconcerting is that only one out of 54 paragraphs of the Paris Declaration on the UN Aid Effectiveness Agenda mentions gender equality.

## Emerging issues

1. Since 2005, an urgent emerging issue for Asia-Pacific is the consequences of displacement caused by natural disasters, but also conflict. The majority of those displaced tend to be women and children. The fallout of disasters disrupts and can altogether eradicate the social capital and support networks that the poor and marginalized depend on for survival. The impact displacement has on girls and women in both the immediate as well as longer term basis needs serious consideration.
2. Valuable lessons have been learnt but institutionalisation has lagged. It is both unfortunate and counterproductive that, for example, gender appropriate/sensitive responses developed in the 2004 tsunami and subsequent recommendations did not come into play automatically as standard operational procedures less than a year later in the Pakistan earthquake disaster of 2005: mistakes were repeated and lessons had to be learnt all over again. This is particularly unfortunate since literature highlighting the nature of problems facing **displaced** girls and women (whether as a result of conflict or natural disasters) and setting out guidelines of best practices in such situations does exist. It is unclear whether responses to the subsequent earthquakes in Indonesia, Iran and Turkey had pro-actively gender sensitive responses. (*Post-script July 2009: It is encouraging that in June-July 2009, facing emergency displacement of an estimated 2 million people<sup>5</sup> authorities in Pakistan built on the lessons of 2005.*)
3. The needs of women displaced both across and within state borders must be addressed, the rights and human dignity. The issues of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has started to receive attention in the UN which is a positive step – it is essential however to ensure that the particular needs and challenges faced by women and girls are addressed as central, not ‘add-on’ concerns and that states be encouraged to adopt adequate measures for their protection and livelihoods. (Still lacking concrete data)

## Recommendations

1. Informed by the Platform, comprehensive gender equality/women’s empowerment need to be developed *and* regularly revisited. Reviews are essential for tracking (and celebrating) achievements, but to gauge persistent and emerging challenges and to devise strategies for addressing these. Gender equality and Goal 3 (Promote gender equality and empower women) must be made central to achieving the MDGs as has been done by Cambodia; Goal 3 needs to be further elaborated in the light of the

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the military operation against armed militants in Swat and other northern areas.

Platform and CEDAW, with more nuanced and detailed targets and indicators. See also gender mainstreaming below.

2. The twelve critical areas of concern highlighted in the Beijing Platform cross-sect. Rather than viewing each as a separate issue to be addressed, the critical areas identified and new emerging ones (e.g. natural disasters and disabilities) must be addressed together as an integrated agenda for change. It is important to focus attention on how progress, stagnation or even reversal in one critical area impacts another. For example, in 2007, the UN “Secretary-General recognised that after decades of efforts by the women’s movement, especially since the adopting of the Beijing Platform for Action, violence against women and girls still remains high and reducing it is now a priority on the international agenda.”<sup>6</sup> Meaningful progress in the area of VAW, however, is dependent not just on government responses to domestic violence but on understanding, documenting and finding ways to effectively address the myriad direct linkages of violence with reproductive health and rights, increasing poverty and conflict situations as well as natural disasters. In turn, reducing reproductive-health related violence may require legal reforms in family law, which in the Platform, are addressed in the separate chapter on human rights.

## B. Institutional Mechanisms & Gender Mainstreaming

The *Platform for Action* identified three inter-related Strategic Objectives to promote institutional structures and strategies to support and underpin action in all the other areas of concern:

- The creation/strengthening of national machineries and other governmental bodies concerned with women’s wellbeing and gender equality,
- The integration of gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programmes and projects,
- The generation and dissemination of gender-disaggregated data for planning and evaluation.

### Positive Trends

Significant progress has been made in establishing national machineries worldwide, including in Asia-Pacific. By 2004, most countries reported some form of national machinery for women: 165 countries compared to 127 in 1985.<sup>7</sup> The nature of such machineries differs from country to country in function of diverse government structures and political preferences. Women’s ministries have been established, notably in South Asia (Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan, and Afghanistan); the Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs established as part of the presidential cabinet in 2005 is considered a particular achievement emanating from the advocacy campaigns of Afghan women’s

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<sup>6</sup> Expert Group Meeting on Gender Statistics and the Use of Violence against Women Indicators in Support of the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action; UN ESCAP [http://www.unescap.org/ESID/GAD/Events/EGM\\_Stats\\_VAWindicators2008/EGM\\_VAW\\_BackgroundNote\\_Sept08.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/ESID/GAD/Events/EGM_Stats_VAWindicators2008/EGM_VAW_BackgroundNote_Sept08.pdf), accessed May 22009

<sup>7</sup> *Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and Compliance with the International Legal Instruments on Women*, Division for the Advancement of Women, 2004. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/country/compliance-table-12.21.04.pdf>

groups supported by international organisations. Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan have, in addition, set up women's departments. Uzbekistan opted to introduce a Deputy Prime Minister to coordinate social protection for families, women, and children; Iran to establish a unit for women's affairs. A number of countries introduced focal points in different ministries to facilitate gender mainstreaming. Some relocated the mechanism promote better and more immediate access to decision making; the Republic of Korea for example made the mechanism a part of the Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs. Other countries elevated the status of the minister for such machinery/institutional arrangements. Turkey, for example, has both a Directorate General on the Status of Women and the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs, Family and Social Services that together are responsible for coordinating and adopting national policies for promoting the equality of women and men. Other countries have introduced parliamentary committees on women.

Some countries have instituted permanent women's commissions. Sometimes, as in the Philippines, the women's commissions may be the principal national machinery and therefore function as a ministry, unit or cabinet division. More commonly, such commissions complement national ministries and units (e.g. the National Commission on Women in India). As autonomous or semi-autonomous bodies complementing another institutional arrangement, the commissions play a vital monitoring role. Often the result of women's advocacy efforts, these commissions can also perform the key function of liaising with civil society, especially women's organizations.

It is encouraging that 44 countries in the Asia Pacific have ratified CEDAW. Ratification was given an impetus by the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW): seven countries in the Asia Pacific region acceded at the time of the FWCW,<sup>8</sup> subsequently, a further 11 states have become States Parties. Post-2000, however, most new accessions are from states in the Pacific,<sup>9</sup> elsewhere in Asia ratification has slowed down. Of the 44 countries in Asia and the Pacific, 37 had submitted one or more reports to the Economic and Social Council, and 15 had submitted at least three reports in 2009.<sup>10</sup> A positive step has been Bangladesh's withdrawal of its reservation on Article 2 as well as articles 13 [a] and 16.1 [f] by Bangladesh in 1997-1998.

## Challenges

1. Progress may not be secure; political instability can lead to set-backs and changed priorities. In Pakistan, for example following the 1995 Beijing Conference, women's groups successfully lobbied to upgrade the women's machinery from a Cabinet Division to a full-fledged Ministry and to ensure the Ministry was supported by the establishment of provincial women's development departments to coordinate and work with line departments, with the required personnel down to the grassroots level to

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<sup>8</sup> In 1995, Malaysia, Singapore, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Fiji and Vanuatu ratified the convention; Pakistan signed in 1995 prior to the 1995 FWCW but ratified in March the following year.

<sup>9</sup> Myanmar (1997), Timor-Leste (2003), Afghanistan (2003), Kyrgyzstan (1997) Kazakhstan (1998), Turkmenistan (1997), the Cook Islands (2006), Kiribati (2004), Micronesia (2004), Marshall Islands (2006), Solomon Islands (2002)

<sup>10</sup> *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2008*. UN ESCAP. 38

implement policies, schemes and projects. A change of government first downgraded the Ministry then merged it with Social Welfare and Special Education.

2. The national machinery proposed in the *Platform* was envisaged as a “central policy-coordinating unit inside government” that would facilitate “government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas.”<sup>11</sup> National machineries, supported by other institutional arrangements, were presumed to have the commitment of all ministries and departments to implement measures for institutionalising gender mainstreaming in their mandated area of operation. The presumption was premature and women’s machineries have been hard-pressed to ensure that all other ministries and departments fulfill their part in ensuring gender mainstreaming. Despite positive measures, the mechanisms and machineries for women – whether new or pre-existing – appear to face similar kinds of challenges, principally:
  - The mandate for such machinery is all too often inadequately defined
  - Financial and human resources are inadequate
3. **Ill-defined mandates** make it difficult for the machineries to effectively fulfill their objectives. This is compounded by **funding that is inadequate** and often not secure. In some cases, such as Pakistan and Iran, institutional mechanisms are hampered by **lacking human resources** – both numerically and in terms of desirable levels of expertise. (Human and financial resources are linked of course, without the latter it is difficult to secure the former.)
4. A related but separate challenge relates to the **source of funding**. Too frequently, national machineries and mechanisms are not supported by national resources but depend on external support. In many cases, such mechanisms would not have been established had it not been for monetary support from international donor agencies. But this raises serious questions of both national ownership and sustainability. First, if the bulk of financing comes from donor agencies and international financial institutions, there is a danger that such funding will end up supporting the development agenda of the donors rather than national priorities. This will only reinforce any prevailing perception that women’s empowerment and gender equality are foreign imposed agendas to be suffered as a conditionality for receiving assistance, rather as desired objectives required for national development. Secondly, when national governments do not contribute financial support for women’s machineries and mechanisms, this not only indicates deficient political support - which is important in itself – it also impedes sustainability. Machineries and mechanisms largely supported by international funding, have greatly reduced chances of being sustained when such funding comes to a close. For example in Pakistan, the provincial Beijing Follow-up Units intended to coordinate action at the provincial level collapsed in three of the four provinces when funding came to an end. Only in Punjab did the unit continue for several years thanks to the support of UNICEF.

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<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingat10/H.%20Institutional%20mechanisms%20for%20the%20advancement%20of%20women.pdf>

## Gender Mainstreaming

Considerable efforts have and are being invested in gender mainstreaming. Yet the paradigmatic shift from a focus on women ('women in development' prior to the Platform, or 'women's empowerment' subsequently) to 'gender' is itself a challenge. To be meaningful 'gender-mainstreaming' must translate into promoting gender equality, which can only come about through women's empowerment. Aside from deficient political commitment, two issues need to be reviewed in gender mainstreaming strategy.

### Challenges

**1. Defining and reporting on gender projects:** A study conducted to assess gender mainstreaming in the UN Aid Effectiveness Agenda, identified two critical problems.<sup>12</sup> The first is that very few agencies maintain public information on financial layouts on 'gender projects' rendering it almost impossible to track commitments. A second even more basic problem is that there seems to be no agreement on what constitutes a 'gender equality' or 'gender mainstreaming' project. After all, all initiatives will impact women as well as men so where is the defining line to be drawn?

**2. Cross-cutting issues in sector-specific structures:** Efforts to gender mainstream are also hampered by a structural problem: most governments have sector-specific structures and line ministries (e.g. health, agriculture, labour, education etc.) at best poorly equipped to address cross-cutting issues such as 'women/girls' who fall into all categories, or e.g. environment. This structural arrangement impedes effective cross-sector planning and implementation both since sector-specific ministries and departments have little to no expertise, sometimes no mandate, and often little will or incentive to operate outside their specific sector. Establishing focal points in different ministries is a necessary but insufficient measure to overcome reluctance on the part of sector and line ministries adopting what they perceive to be the agenda of another ministry/department, i.e. the women-focused mechanism or institution.

Gender mainstreaming is problematic when women-specific mechanisms have neither the financial means nor the institutional resources to address the myriad problems of half the country's population, while other sectors are unequipped and/or unwilling to address the specific needs of women. Unless this structural flaw is addressed and rectified, schemes and projects for women's empowerment developed by the main national machinery for women will continue to face serious difficulties in implementation. Tending to fall between each sector ministry's specified mandate, they may end up owned by none.

**3. Gender-responsive budgeting** is a relatively new strategy. According to UNIFEM, attempts to mainstream gender in budgets has had limited success, mainly because of the limited use of gender mainstreaming as a planning tool, and the lack of systems in

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<sup>12</sup> Themrise Khan. 'Gender Equality and Aid Effectiveness Study' presented at the *National Consultation on Gender Equality and Aid Effectiveness* organized by the Interagency Gender and Development Group (INGAD), 16 July 2008, Islamabad. INGAD brings together some 33 gender-focused bilateral donors and international agencies in Pakistan

both donor and recipient countries.<sup>13</sup> It is encouraging therefore that Papua New Guinea and Fiji have introduced performance-based budgeting – and these new initiatives should be reviewed for potential replication in other Asia-Pacific countries.

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<sup>13</sup> UNIFEM. *Promoting gender Equality in the Aid effectiveness Agenda in the Asia Pacific – engaging the principles of the Paris Declaration*, UNIFEM Discussion Paper, November 2007.

Taking the Beijing Conference call to “Look at the world through women’s eyes,” there is a need to re-think some of presumptions underlying macro level planning.

## Making women’s empowerment a national priority at all levels

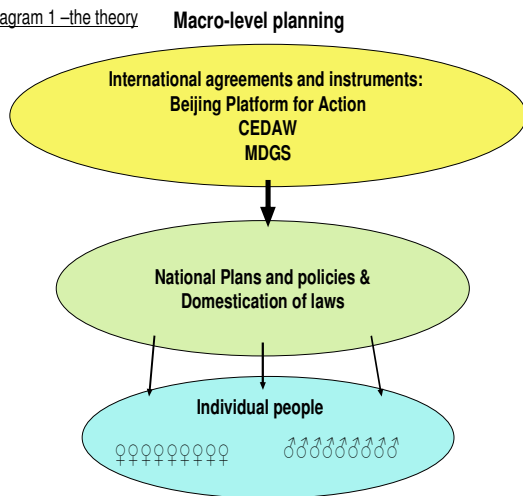
1. **Revisiting the planning paradigm:** Typically, planning is carried out at the macro level i.e. at the provincial/state, national, regional and international levels, and focuses either on developing infrastructure or human resources. Planning largely addresses people as individuated persons within set categories of population: peasants, urban workers, students, professionals, rural/urban populations etc. Women (and girls) are located in most if not all categories but still have differentiated needs from those of men/boys. Focused on the state’s citizens, planning tends to overlook certain categories of people, such as migrant workers and IDPs, whose needs tend to be overlooked.
2. Generally, based on statistical data, development planning does not address issues relating to people’s rights. These are seen as the purview of the parliament and elected representatives (and to some extent the ministry of law). The implication is that social and especially economic development can be achieved without rights. Even more critically for girls and women, development planning does not factor in existing gender systems and their attendant power structures and dynamics. It is well to remember that people do not inhabit statistical data sheets but in societies and that lives are embedded within particular social collectivities that have their own values and normative rules and, not infrequently, punitive systems for contravening such rules and values imposed by parallel systems of adjudication and social organizations such as councils of village elders in addition to family males. Starting with the immediate family and expanding outwards, the hold of social collectivities is especially strong at the meso level.<sup>14</sup> These meso-level dynamics define the differentiated gender system women inhabit, and it is at the meso level that women most immediately experience the influence and control exercised by gender systems.
3. **Planning completely ignores this critical meso level.** There is a presumption that if effective plans are developed, individual citizens will automatically benefit. This is a fallacy: plans and policies *cannot* reach individuals directly; they are filtered through meso level systems where plans, policies and schemes are negotiated, modified and sometimes completely blocked. Diagrams 1 and 2 illustrate a central challenge to planning, i.e. the need to address the complicated system of structures and power relations operating at the meso level.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Vivienne Wee and Farida Shaheed: *Women Empowering Themselves – A framework that interrogates and transforms*. SEARC, City University of Hong Kong, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Farida Shaheed. *Strategizing for Women’s Empowerment*, Presentation at ESCAP-WEMC Forum, *Where’s the Power in Women’s Empowerment?*, UN ESCAP, Bangkok - August 4<sup>th</sup> 2008



Diagram 1 –the theory



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Diagram 2 - Reality



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Conversely, when women at the grassroots act to empower themselves, to demand their rights and to access benefits and entitlements, their efforts are confronted - and often blocked - by the forces operating at the meso level. This impedes the institutionalisation of any gains they may achieve locally.

**Non-state meso level forces seriously challenge progress** and women denied access to state-policies and benefits as well as state-granted rights in the name of **tradition, culture and religion**. Unless these forces are recognized, factored into planning processes and addressed, women will continue to be caught between different conflicting systems: macro-level formal systems which encourage them and support their rights in theory on the one hand and informal systems within which they are immediately located. The latter often impede women's access to state benefits and legal entitlements. (See also below Power and Decision-Making) The threat of being ostracized by and from their own families and communities is a very powerful force that negates women's agency. Women find themselves **caught between the promises of equality and benefits held out by citizenship on the one hand, and the imperatives of maintaining their societal belonging and social capital** in their smaller, more immediate social collectivities (starting with the family) on the other.

Moreover, **the further removed state institutions and officials are from women's daily lives, the greater will be the problem**. Without an enabling state presence at the local level, even the best of policies and plans risk never reaching women so long as meso level forces keep women isolated, obstruct women's access to information (including about existing state laws and entitlements), and block access to opportunities, whether in terms of health, economic or educational benefits. Development planning must take cognizance of and bear in mind the existence and impact of cultural impediments to progress. (developed further below)

4. **The state's meso level** The meso level also presents a challenge to implementation within state structures. Macro-level policies are rarely communicated and explained or transformed into standard operational procedures at the meso level of implementation. There is a paucity of efforts to ensure that policy and project implementers, be they hospital employees or agricultural extension workers, the police station or the local social welfare department, are properly oriented to new policies and changed perspectives. Policies, projects and schemes cannot hope to succeed if policy documents and their implications for the day to day work of implementers is not effectively communicated in appropriate language with attendant standard operational procedures integrated into the system.

## Recommendations

1. **CEDAW** All countries in the Asia-Pacific must be encouraged to ratify CEDAW; UNIFEM-led efforts to support the reporting processes must continue. The assistance being provided to States Parties by UNIFEM for developing longer-term action plans to give effect to CEDAW and reorienting states to replace a four-year review by more systematic regular review on achievements is an important initiative and must continue. Care must be taken however to ensure (a) ownership of such plans by a wide cross-section of state officials (this UNIFEM is conscious of) and (b) to ensure that such plans are not stand-alone, but part of a comprehensive plan for women's empowerment.

Optional Protocol to be ratified and those who have not signed should indicate what obstacles exist to acceding. It is noteworthy that countries are influenced by developments in their region/sub-region and it is important to identify 'drivers' for positive change as well as to identify obstacles. The International Women's watch (IWRAP) looking into drivers and obstacles believes, for instance, that the awkwardness of being the only ASEAN state that had not ratified CEDAW may have encouraged Brunei to sign. In Korea, however progress is attributable to a combination of civil society organizations working together with a dedicated Ministry.

Separately those States Parties which have entered reservations to consider withdrawing such reservations.

2. **Action Plans for Women:** Separate plans for women's empowerment and development are necessary but insufficient. Gender equality issues highlighted in the *Platform* and CEDAW need to be integrated into all national development plans and budgets. All countries should be encouraged to emulate Cambodia which has not only made gender equality central to the MDGs but has made the Ministry for Women's Affairs a priority ministry in its Medium Term Expenditure Framework and National Strategic Development Plans. **Governments need to develop one integrated national plan for women's empowerment and gender equality.** Using existing plans for implementing the Platform as a base, updated plans must integrate actions around and implications of the MDGs, Aid Effectiveness, CEDAW and other international commitments. Such integrated plans will bolster the

position of national governments in negotiating assistance and help to ensure that all aid – regardless of provenance feeds into a **nationally owned agenda for change**.

3. **Integrating plan contents into all national plans and budgetary processes**  
National governments must make sure that the integrated comprehensive plan and proposed actions for gender equality and women’s empowerment are systematically integrated into all development plans and adequately financed.
4. **Donor coordination** There is an urgent need for coordination amongst bilateral donors, UN agencies, international financial institutions to:
  - a. Dovetail various streams of development planning and strategies (e.g. MDGs, and Aid Effectiveness)
  - b. Align all major initiatives with the *Platform* and CEDAW
5. **Effective Three-Way Partnership:** Papua New Guinea’s suggestion of a three-way partnership for managing results under the Paris Declaration should be adopted for all major interventions, including progress on the *Platform*.<sup>16</sup> The proposed partnership has three directions:
  1. Top-down political and bureaucratic commitment
  2. Bottom-up personal and community ownership
  3. Outside-in effective donors-NGO partnerships

To be effective, apart from commitment at the highest level, this proposed 3-way partnership requires:

- top-down communication and ownership amongst the political and bureaucratic
  - systems and mechanisms for meaningful inclusion of people at the grassroots, with a particular care to ensure the more vulnerable are an integral part of the process of policy formulation and decision-making
  - establishing and institutionalizing mechanisms and procedures for regular contact between civil society actors and donors as well as government representatives
6. **Redefining women’s machineries as champion advocates** Studies suggest a need to revisit the role of national machineries for women: rather than being conceived as planners and implementers, in keeping with the Platform’s perspective, such machineries and mechanisms need to be greatly strengthened as the strongest advocates and champions of women’s needs across sectors. To be effective, these champion advocates need to be seated at the highest levels of each and every key national decision-making forums. Similar arrangements must be replicated at the sub-national level. Inter alia this means that women need to be effectively represented in all inter-governmental bodies, including throughout the UN system and the international (and national) financial institutions.

The UN system has and continues to play a vital role in building consensus and taking forward the agenda for women’s empowerment and gender equality. In this it

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<sup>16</sup> UNIFEM. *Promoting Gender Equality in the Aid effectiveness Agenda in the Asia Pacific – engaging the principles of the Paris Declaration*, UNIFEM Discussion Paper, November 2007; page 6

would be critical to mobilize support for **appropriate gender architecture within the UN** with a dedicated agency, headed by an Under-Secretary and ambitiously financed as promised, starting with a minimum budget of a billion dollars.

Domestically, to be effective, it is essential that national machineries, bodies and other institutional arrangements for women's empowerment are allocated permanent positions, are assured sufficient and sustainable financial resources to be effective. Adequate capacity building must also be built in so that institutional arrangements for women's empowerment and gender equality can benefit from high quality sustained human resources.

7. **System-wide ownership** Focused attention must be devoted to changing the attitudes of duty-bearers throughout the system, not just at the top. Particularly critical is the meso level. For this:
  - Information: It is vital that whenever a policy is made, this political commitment is followed through at all levels and by all means so as to effectuate meaningful transformation. In Pakistan, for example, despite positive legal reform, in the area of family law matters, lower court judges who are unaware of these continue to give their rulings according to the old provisions. All countries must ensure that policy implementers are provided adequate information in appropriate language and a format that highlights implications for their own particular contribution. This must be accompanied by orientation and training, and translating policies into standard operational procedures so changes are institutionalised and sustained.
  - Gender orientation Meso-level implementers of policies and plans need to be re-oriented to gender issues, to the MDGs, to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. It is not enough for planners to be acquainted; the implementers need to have equivalent knowledge. We need to ensure that the policeman on the street and the health dispenser is familiar. Otherwise policies will only remain nice paperwork in restricted circles that do not touch women's daily lives.
8. **Defining 'gender equality' and 'gender-mainstreaming'** Difficulties in tracking commitments to 'gender equality' and 'gender mainstreaming' suggest the need to develop operative definitions that highlight women's empowerment. Consensus building is needed on such a definition amongst all stakeholders, including international financial institutions, donors and UN agencies as well as governments but, equally civil society groups.
9. **Accounting for resources for Gender Equality** Gender mainstreaming cannot be accomplished without allocating sufficient financial resources. As exemplified at the 33-member Interagency Gender and Development Group (INGAD) in 2008, very few donor agencies provide information on the financial allocations for 'gender.' It is important to encourage all donors to adopt the guidelines used by those that do, such as NORAD, the Dutch and CIDA so that financial commitments become visible and usage can be effectively tracked. Such information must highlight women's empowerment and development.

An important suggestion of the UN Development Group under the **One Budget Framework** is to pilot a system of gender disaggregated tracking of budgets, for it suggests a Task Team to review and build on existing systems such as the OECD DAC's Gender Marker and the UNDP system for tracking revenue, allocations and expenditures for gender equality.<sup>17</sup>

**10. Documentation & gender-disaggregated data** Gender-disaggregated data is an old but persistent problem. Efforts are being made to build capacity amongst national authorities responsible for statistics. There is a need to collect nuanced gender appropriate as well as gender-disaggregated data. Efforts can benefit from Cambodia's National Statistical Master Plan which specifies gaps and suggests measures to address the gaps. Measure should be taken to ensure that data collected is actually compiled and shared; gender disaggregated data must be widely available to the public.

Data collected needs to be expanded from statistical information to encompass an understanding of the diverse factors that impact women's lives (positively and negatively) and documentation of the successful strategies women have employed for their own empowerment processes.

Planning can only be as effective as the **basic documentation of population** in a country: the registration of births and changes in marital status are essential for basic planning. Additionally, measures must to ensure that all women are issued with the identification and other documentation necessary to access benefits and rights.

As essential as statistical information is for planning; it may not be enough to alter the lived realities of the majority of women. Concerted efforts are needed not to measure women's empowerment but to understand the obstacles to women's empowerment on the one hand and the sources of support that help bring about positive change. Equally critical is to identify, document and understand women's successful stories of empowerment that do exist in order to extract the invaluable lessons for replication and up-scaling these provide. Such **qualitative research** studies are necessary for overcoming current blockages to women's empowerment. One important support for such efforts comes from the Central Research Department of DFID. For Asia Pacific, an important model being developed with the support of DFID is the work of the Asia-focused research consortium Women's empowerment in *Muslim Contexts: gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out (WEMC)*. WEMC has brought together the lessons learnt so far in its research framework: *Women Empowering Themselves – A framework that interrogates and transforms*. Other similar efforts should be pooled together for shared learning and further research.

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<sup>17</sup> *Delivering as One on Gender – UN Retreat, Hanoi, November 2008*, power point presentation at CSW Meeting Tuesday 3 March 2009; slide 10

11. **Monitoring** The need to develop appropriate indicators is recognized; and efforts are underway in some countries assisted by UNIFEM and other UN agencies. Monitoring and evaluation performas and procedures need to be integrated into all development processes and institutionalized, making an assessment of gender differentiated impact obligatory for all initiatives. This must start at the planning stage and continue throughout the life cycle of the project/programme with regular periodic reviews. As stated in the Jakarta Declaration on Gender Equality and Aid Effectiveness “The development of effectiveness of aid requires explicit gender equality goals and targets in national development strategies and budgetary processes.”<sup>18</sup>

## Power and Decision-making

The Platform identifies two key areas for action to increase women’s decision-making powers:

1. Measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making
2. Increasing women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership

Concrete actions have mostly, if not exclusively, focused on enhancing women’s political representation. In Asia-Pacific progress has been a result of affirmative action measures. The proportion of seats held by women in national parliament has been growing, but very slowly indeed. In 2005 women represented 17% of single (unicameral) and lower houses of parliament globally.<sup>19</sup> This is a slow increase of 4% in fifteen years (from 13% in 1990). There are wide regional disparities in progress and status. The highest percentage of women representatives is found in the Nordic countries (41.6%) followed by the Americas (19.4%), Europe (excluding Nordic countries 19.0%), Sub-Saharan Africa (17.0% ), Asia (16.6%) , the Pacific (12.6%), and finally Arab states (9.5%).

In 2006, only seven Asian countries had more than 20% women in parliaments,<sup>20</sup> since then Afghanistan with 27.7% has joined this select group. The overall ratio in Asia-Pacific is 12.8%. This is a marked improvement over the 8.8% in 2000 and 10.6% in 2005. Within Asia Pacific, the highest percentage of women in parliaments is to be found in South-East Asia where women make up 17.4% of legislators (up from 16.2% in 2000). This is followed by East and North-east Asia at 14%, (up from 11.6% in 2000), South and West Asia with 11.7% (up from 7.2% in 2000), and North and Central Asia at 10.8% (up from 8.6% in 2000). In the Pacific however women are still only 6.4% of representatives with a less than 1 percentile increase since 2000 (5.9%). It is helpful that one of the indicators for MDG3 is the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. Still, it seems rather unlikely that the Asia-Pacific region will meet the hoped for target of 30% women in parliament by 2015 unless countries rapidly adopt more affirmative action measures.

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<sup>18</sup> *Jakarta Declaration on Gender Equality and Aid Effectiveness*, 27 August 2007

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.un-instraw.org/en/ggpp/general/fact-sheet.html> (accessed 8-05-09)

<sup>20</sup> New Zealand at 32.2%, Vietnam at 27.35, Australia at 24.7% of the lower house and 35.5% of the upper house, Tajikistan at 23.5% of the upper house, Laos at 22.9%, Pakistan at 21.3% of the lower house and Malaysia at 25.7% of the upper house.

The most striking progress is Afghanistan where affirmative measures have enabled women to jump from no representation at all to almost 30 percent of the parliament. Similarly, the women are 21.1% of Pakistan's parliament thanks to affirmative action that reserves seats for women in the national and provincial assemblies and, for the first time, in the upper house in its bicameral system. Also encouraging is the announcement of Bangladesh that it will raise the number of seats reserved for women in its unicameral legislature from 45 to 100 out of the total 300 seats. This would put Bangladesh at par with New Zealand and Australia. In Malaysia women make up over a quarter of its representatives in the upper house (although the over-all figure is 10% and amongst the lowest in South East Asia. Some countries have made it mandatory for parties contesting elections to field a certain percentage of women candidates. This has been less effective in bolstering the number of women in legislatures, simply because all too frequently, parties field female candidates on seats they are likely to lose.

Especially in South Asia, inspired by the 33% Panchayati Raj system introduced in India in the 1990s, steps have been taken to ensure and bolster women's presence in the local government structures. Countries have not, however, emulated the reserved constituencies in India. Most have opted for directly or indirectly reserved seats for women. (Pakistan has reserved 33% of the seats in all three tiers of local government.)

Across the globe, significant efforts have been made by bilateral donor agencies, international financial institutions as well as UN agencies and international and national civil society institutions and initiatives to strengthen women's capacity for and actual political participation. These have undoubtedly facilitated women's participation especially for first-timers and must continue to provide technical training e.g. in procedural matters women tend to be less familiar with than men, but also where needed, other skills such as drafting legalization. Equally important is leadership training.

Women must be a focus of voter registration and accurate electoral rolls. A specific technical problem encountered by many women is the change of name that often accompanies their change in marital status (as well as changed domicile). Electoral rolls may not incorporate changed status and name quickly enough, or very often people do not bother to register the change and be caught unawares. It would be far preferable to have systems that allow women to maintain one identity card issued whenever they reach majority and for marital information to be maintained separately.

Rarely, however, have interventions gone beyond the two strategic objectives to address the other aspects of decision-making highlighted by the *Platform* in the Chapter on Power and Decision-Making. It is now time to do so. It is vital to recognize that without addressing decision-making in women's immediate contexts, it will be difficult to achieve meaningful progress in power and decision-making in ways that actually enable women's empowerment. Discussions with women in the field indicate that women are often less interested in enhanced decision-making in political processes than in increased power to decide personal matters, such as who they marry. It seems somewhat contradictory to concentrate all efforts and expect women to be effective decision-makers about their country or community's welfare by seating them in legislative bodies on the one hand, whilst turning a blind eye to the powerlessness of so many women to make even the simplest decisions about their own lives, e.g. whether to marry and who, whether to have

children, when and how many, to be able to socialize with whom they please, to seek employment and have the power to decide usage of income, etc. These impediments may be caused by existing laws, by 'culture' as defined by the powerful and by the meso-level actors who impede women's access to resources, information and decision-making. Further as described above, in most countries, non-formal decision-making structures continue to play a key role in women's lives. It is time to address these issues that impede women's access to power and decision-making in their everyday lives.

## Emerging Issues

1. **Decentralisation** With regards to local government, it is worth noting that several countries have introduced devolution/decentralization as a means of bolstering the voice of the more vulnerable population and including citizens in decision-making from the bottom up. Such experiments may not always support gender equality; they may even inadvertently undermine achievements. In Indonesia, for example, decentralization seems to have facilitated the assumption of power in local districts by political Islamists (9 in 2005, now 56) whose political agenda is against gender equality. Of course, democratic processes must be free for all to contest. The challenge in Indonesia and elsewhere is to ensure that measures introduced by local governments are not in direct contradiction to national policies and national as well as international commitments.<sup>21</sup> For Indonesia, a Party to CEDAW, this is a major and growing challenge the politico-religious forces are enforcing mandatory veils, policing the streets, restricting women's mobility and even introducing corporal punishments in contravention of national laws and policies for women found to contravene their self-serving notions of propriety.

Clearly then, the impact of devolution/decentralisation needs to be examined along with central-state periphery relations.

2. **Growing threat of political-religious forces outside the democratic framework** There is a dangerous trend of the increasing political use of religion, of political agendas that are justified or presented in religious language. This is especially visible in South Asia which have seen the rise of conservative political forces. While these agendas may differ - radically even - in other aspects, they all seem to have a uniformly negative attitude on women and reject gender equality. It is impossible to do any justice to the underlying reasons for such a trend, but it is important to flag this as an area requiring some attention. Of concern is how the presence of so-called religious political parties has managed to shift the political and social discourse even when they fail to win seats in electoral processes - indeed sometimes even when they are roundly rejected at the polls. Such groups are especially visible amongst Muslim populations both as majority populations and as minority ones. For women, the impact has been negative. Even though women are mobilised and active in the Hindutva elements and Islamist parties, such empowerment seems to be restricted to the individual levels. On the positive side,

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<sup>21</sup> Field findings of WEMC research partners Semarak Cemaraku Nusi and Solidaritas Perempuan, cited by Vivienne Wee in *Where's the power in women's empowerment and why does this matter?* Presentation at the ESCAP-WEMC Forum, *Where's the Power in Women's Empowerment?*, UN ESCAP, Bangkok - August 4<sup>th</sup> 2008.



the engagement in the general political process has helped to shift the position of such parties to more open agendas, such as in Turkey.

3. A separate and even greater threat is posed by elements that have opted out of (or never bothered to enter) the democratic processes and instead are pursuing their agendas through guns, bombs and bullets. The Taliban in Pakistan constitute the most dangerous current example of such militancy purposefully targets women as a first and preferred target, using women's bodies as the territories over which to impose their writ and challenge that of the state. The Taliban in Pakistan are an even more virulent strand, if that is possible, than those in Afghanistan earlier on. Hundreds of schools (mostly for girls) have been bombed or otherwise destroyed. People have been killed in brutal fashion and their bodies abused. Summary parodies of courts have condemned unknown numbers. Women have been totally shrouded and entombed in their homes, forbidden to even go to market. Their ability to silence opposition has drawn upon people's attachment to their religion: all actions are justified by reference to Islam, including the ban on vaccination against polio and the murder of a doctor in 2006. The problem was identified by the Shirkat Gah 2007 Shadow Report on CEDAW, *Talibanisation and Poor Governance: Undermining CEDAW in Pakistan*. The fact that the government did little to nothing about curtailing such groups since 2002 and has allowed itself to be blackmailed in the name of religion is utterly alarming and underscores the urgent need to address the misuse of religion in political agendas.

Of global concern are the cross-country linkages such groups have. Taliban in Pakistan comprise many nationalities, mostly from Asia. Linkages with migrant communities in Europe and North America have already been noted. Now there are hints that operations may be tending to encompass people beyond the emigrant communities.

4. **Social dimension of poverty** Participatory research shows that women do not define poverty in exclusively economic terms. They see poverty as linked with specific social groups and power differentials of different groups. Poverty depends on power derived from social belonging (class but also ethnicity), political influence, family connections, and religion as well as economic assets and control. Plans and policies to reduce poverty must take cognizance of the power and qualitative dimensions of poverty.

## Challenges

1. **Simply ensuring numbers** as provided for in the MDG3 indicator, **does not guarantee progress** on gender equality and women's empowerment as called for in the Platform. In Indonesia, the House of Representatives raised the quota of women's representation in political parties to 35 percent in July 2007, even though no party had managed to fulfill the previous 30 percent quota for women in the 2004 parliamentary elections. (Women still make up only 12 percent of the House and only 7-8 per cent in regional legislatures). Paradoxically this opportunity seems to have been most effectively pursued by the conservative politico-religious party, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, that fielded the highest percentage of female candidates in 2004 and currently is running a

mass membership drive for the upcoming 2009 elections.<sup>22</sup> Care needs to be taken that plans do not facilitate a contretemps for gender equality; measure must ensure that women's hard gained rights are not undermined through devolution processes.

2. **Supporting women as rights claimants** All out efforts are required to ensure that women are supported to be rights claimants. **The basic approach cannot be piecemeal, increasing women's decision-making and hence power has not been seen as a comprehensive agenda.** Not only must women exercise free choice in deciding amongst available options, women must be supported to formulate the choices that exist. In this efforts must be made to address the sources of legitimization used to justify the existing disempowering structures of power. In planning measures for women's empowerment it is important to realise that a relaxation or redefinition of the gender rules in one aspect of life does not transfer automatically to another. For example, a woman may be able to break previous rules in order to earn a livelihood, but this does not at all mean that she will therefore gain the right to socialize with whom she wants. Unfortunately there are no easy solutions.
3. **The formidable barrier of culture & threatened or actual violence** In 2006, a civil society review on women in politics and decision-making in Asia Pacific, concluded that progress was impeded by both institutional and cultural barriers to women's participation.<sup>23</sup> The persistence of male dominated social structures and socialization processes seriously impede women's meaningful participation in political and decision-making processes. Party politics and electoral systems are generally biased against women. Women continue to be assigned traditional domestic roles confined to the household, and models of political leadership and participation continue to privilege masculine traits while feminine qualities are deemed unsuitable for political leadership.

**Tradition, culture and religion** are used to keep women disempowered. Women are made to believe that changing their lives and gender-roles is contradictory to the values and precepts of their traditions, culture or religion. Women themselves will buy into such notions. Social cultural notions of appropriateness/inappropriateness will function as gatekeepers to change. In China, for instance, where government-funded national education is available to all, women in the Dongxiang Autonomous County of Gansu, nevertheless say that they withdraw girls from school because 'If a young lady is still in school when she gets older, villagers will talk about it,' or 'Education is pointless. I prefer to study at the mosque. Being a Hui, praying with your rosary is most important. As long as you know how to work on the farming estate, it's all right. Women don't leave the house anyway.'<sup>24</sup> In Pakistan, and elsewhere in South Asia, adolescent

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<sup>22</sup> Research findings of the Indonesian research teams of Solidaritas Perempuan, Smarak Cerlang Nusa and the Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University Hong Kong of the research consortium: *Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: gender, poverty and demoralisation from the inside out* (WEMC). Reported in the WEMC Research Management Committee meeting August 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Sixth Asia Pacific Congress of Women in Politics and Decision making. *The Ten Year (2006-2016) Asia Pacific Platform for Action of women in Politics and Decision-Making, February 10-12, 2006*, Organised by the Center for Asia Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP) and Pilipina

<sup>24</sup> Field findings of research partners of International Gender Studies, Oxford University in China, cited by Vivienne Wee in *Where's the power in women's empowerment and why does this matter?* Presentation at the ESCAP-WEMC Forum, *Where's the Power in Women's Empowerment?*, UN ESCAP, Bangkok - August 4<sup>th</sup> 2008.

girls will not be taken for medical examinations or treatment for fear of what the neighbours will say and, as a result, the potential negative impact this may have on marriage prospects.

**Gender-based violence** When women do challenge such notions, they can face violence, a key mechanism of control exercised at the family and community level. Gender-based violence – both threatened and actual acts of gender based violence is used to deny women rights, power over self and access to decision-making forums, including but not only the formal political processes. The damaging role of cultural justifications was noted in 2005 by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women said that despite positive developments in laws and standard-setting, the biggest problem in addressing VAW was the worldwide use of ‘culture and religion to deny women’s rights.’<sup>25</sup> The pivotal role played by culture has been reiterated, since then, by the current Special Rapporteur on VAW.<sup>26</sup> But to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, it is crucial that people first reject the ‘cultural’ excuses that justify and thereby perpetuate such violence. Violent practices in the name of culture are serious impediments to women’s power and decision-making.

The Asia Pacific region prides itself on its culture and values, yet it is time to consider which aspects of our culture and values we want to retain and need to be changed or discarded. It would be well to remember that, as Ashish Nandy said,<sup>27</sup> the greatest tradition is the tradition of re-inventing tradition. Culture must not be allowed to be an excuse to deny or to dilute women’s rights and gender equality or to justify inaction. Equally there is a need to examine who defines a community’s culture and values, who assumes the role of community spokespersons appropriating the right to function as the gatekeepers of the community, and especially the community women. It is important that states and other policy-makers and decision-makers in national regional and international forums do not authenticate such spokespersons by automatically inviting them to the decision-making tables, while excluding the women they claim to represent.

**Support systems for decision-making** It is important to identify which support mechanisms, institutions and actors women can and most frequently access in different environments for which issues. Decision-making is often predicated on accessing some support. One reason that women decide to forego their inheritance, for example, is in order not to alienate their brothers who are perceived as the main source of support should problems arise in their marriages. For women to exercise decision-making requires ensuring women’s access to safe spaces (e.g. shelters, meeting rooms, safe spaces) that would enable them to discuss their issues and arrive at meaningful and empowering choices.

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<sup>25</sup> Radhika Coomaraswamy quoted in S. Cameron-Moore, 5 May 2005, ‘Violence against women rising in South Asia: UN’, Islamabad: Reuters, available at <http://www.dawn.com/2005/05/05/int11.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Especially *The Due Diligence Standard as a Tool for the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (A/HRC/4/34, 17 January 2007) and Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006 entitled “Human Rights Council”, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: *Intersections between Culture and Violence Against Women*. United Nations Human Rights Council, Fourth session, Item 2 of the provisional agenda.

<sup>27</sup> Ashish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford University Press. Delhi, 1983.

The need for safe spaces was identified in the post-tsunami disaster relief and was successfully introduced in some places. The critical role played by the availability (or lack thereof) of spaces for women organizing is also a key finding across the multiple research sites of a multi-country Asia-focused research on women's empowerment. Women desire a space to come together regardless of whether the women are rural or urban, migrant workers or home-makers and irrespective of whether their main focus is on political participation, health or economic well-being. The existence of spaces enables women to strategise for their own well-being. It can also strengthen their voice in the community decision-making processes as well.

## Recommendations

- 1. Inclusion in financial and 'hard' sector decision-making** Efforts to increase women's representation in political decision-making forums are essential and must be pursued. However, there is a need to go beyond numbers; efforts need to be made to ensure that when women overcome barriers to be in parliament they participate in economic decision-making and are not relegated to 'soft sectors' such as women's affairs and social welfare for example. Gaining a seat in political decision-making is not enough to bring about gender equality and only half the struggle.
- 2. Representation in administrative structures** While the UN recommendation for a minimum 30 percent representation of women in the political decision-making is a welcome measure gaining consensus; there is a need for parallel actions to overcome the absence of women in the administrative structure of states.
- 3. Appropriate cultural responses** Initiatives around power and decision-making need to focus on cultural barriers, existing family laws, and meso-level power structures and dynamics; and find strategies to address these crucial obstacles to women's empowerment.
- 4. Claiming the right to define culture** Measures need to be taken to help women to claim the right to define their culture and norms, from the family and household to the global level. Women's agency will not be unlocked until women feel that their demanding rights as women is not alien to their culture or tradition (however that is described) This may seem to be insubstantial but it is key to supporting women as rights claimants and to eliminate barriers to decision-making and power erected and maintained by non-state social actors.
- 5. Supporting women's organising efforts and spaces** Programmes must be introduced that provide technical and financial support to women's collective organizing and the spaces they need to do this. Support must include linkages to other initiatives and facilitate the participation of women not just as individuals but as a group in decision-making processes

## Key Supportive measures

- 1. Information** All-out efforts must be made to inform women of the policies and the rights to which they are entitled under the law by all means possible: the educational system as well as mass media. Without this information, women cannot be expected to exert their agency to access rights. There is now sufficient evidence

that knowledge about the law does strengthen the ability of women to bargain and re-negotiate relationships within the household, without their ever accessing legal forums.

2. **Resources** Women's access to and control over resources, especially economic resources, is critical and needs to be promoted. Resources, however, include information and skills as well as supportive measures to act upon their choices.