EMERGING ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL:
SOCIO-ECONOMIC MEASURES TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY
IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS

(Item 6 (c) of the provisional agenda)

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

Empowerment of women in the economic and social fields constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of all development efforts in the region. Following the adoption of the Jakarta Declaration for the Advancement of Women in Asia and the Pacific (1994), and the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (1995), significant achievements have been made in empowering women in the region. Their economic participation has shown uneven but steady progress with gender differentials in wages falling in many instances. Significant progress has also been made in terms of increases in female literacy and life expectancy rates, and reduction in mortality rates. A growing number of women are also succeeding in the use of new and innovative technologies, especially information technologies, and empowering themselves through effective participation in national machineries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, formidable challenges exist, many of which have been compounded by the present economic crisis and the adjustment process. Women are facing increased lay-offs and redundancies and are falling back on the informal sector and the rural sector for economic survival. An increasing number of women are being trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labour, with growing incidents of violence against women. Many migrant women face the bleak prospects of unemployment when they return home. Although significant progress has been made in alleviating poverty in the region, the women in poverty continue to suffer from economic hardship and social exclusion. With the changing demographic structure of the region and increase in the proportion of older persons, especially older women, the need for appropriate policies and systems to provide economic and social support will be an important issue. Promoting the greater participation of women in decision-making will continue to be a formidable challenge. The task of social and economic empowerment of women therefore remains a priority area of concern for the countries of the region.
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INTRODUCTION

1. The goal of achieving the economic and social empowerment of women is enshrined in the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985), the Jakarta Declaration for the Advancement of Women in Asia and the Pacific (1994), and the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (1995). These landmark declarations heralded a new beginning in the region's determination to achieve the economic, social and political emancipation of women and galvanized national action as well as leading to regional cooperation in achieving the economic and social empowerment of women.

2. As a consequence, the empowerment of women constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of all the development efforts of almost all countries in the region. The integration of the region's trade, investment and financial ties with the world economy has altered the economic and social roles of women as business owners, entrepreneurs, managers, workers and family support providers. The continuing growth of the service sector and the declining importance of physical capital in the production process are also bringing new opportunities for women to improve their economic and social status. The activities of women's organizations and networks have contributed significantly in raising consciousness about the need for the economic and social empowerment of women.

3. There are also formidable challenges. The progress so far achieved in empowering women is highly uneven, with the weaker economies, especially the least developed countries and the economies in transition, falling significantly behind. The present economic turmoil has exposed women to greater uncertainty. They are now experiencing the major brunt of the crisis and the adjustment process in the form of increased unemployment. Poverty remains the single most debilitating factor, hampering the integration of women into the development process. In many countries, the number of women in poverty continues to grow, with renewed fear that the present economic crisis in the region is likely to push a large number of women into poverty and social despair. Trafficking in women and children, with all its attendant social ills, and violence against women, have remained a major cause for concern in the region. The problems of economic and social support for ageing populations, especially older women, loom as an emerging challenge. Women are still grossly under-represented in the decision-making process and have restricted access to productive resources and social support systems.

I. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: SOME RECENT TRENDS

4. Since the beginning of this decade, much has been achieved in empowering women in the economic and social fields. An increasing volume of development financial resources has been devoted to achieving that objective. Consequently, many countries of the region have been able to report increased female literacy and enrolment rates, improved gender equality in education, reduced infant and child mortality rates, declining maternal mortality rates and expanding access to reproductive health
services. The participation of women in formal economic activities has also registered a noticeable improvement.

A. Growing economic participation

5. Economic empowerment constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks in efforts towards the overall empowerment of women. Participation in formal economic activities on terms and conditions which reflect the productive capacity of women, and their control over their own incomes, are some of the important dimensions of economic empowerment. In that context, the increase in economic participation has been the most significant change for women throughout the region during the last two decades. This is reflected in the growing labour-force participation rates across all the countries in the region for the period 1980-1996 (table 1). Although the increasing work participation of women has been viewed as part of the general employment boom created by the export-led economic expansion, female labour-force participation rates have tended to increase more than those for men in the Asian and Pacific region, suggesting that women's economic participation has been a critical feature of the region's quest for the economic empowerment of women.

6. There are significant differences within the region, indicating that the progress on this front has been highly uneven. Table 1 shows that the East and South-East Asian countries achieved substantially higher rates of female labour-force participation than South Asian countries (except Sri Lanka). But the differences are even greater than indicated by the available data, for in South Asia (and especially in Bangladesh and India) a notable part of the increase in participation rates has been due to the greater recognition of women's work in national census and sample surveys.

7. It is now widely appreciated that the Asian economic dynamism was fuelled by the productive contributions of Asian women: in the form of paid labour in export-related activities and in services, through the remittances sent by migrant women workers, and through the vast amounts of unpaid labour of women as liberalization and government fiscal contraction transferred many areas of public provision of goods and services to households and to women within households. The female share of total employment by sector in a number of Asian countries is quite high, particularly in China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Export-oriented production for the world market and the ability to preserve competitiveness in such production over an extended period of time appear to be crucial in explaining women's high share in total employment.
Table 1. Labour force structure and trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Growth rate (percentage)</th>
<th>Labour-force participation rate</th>
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8. Gender-based wage differentials have been decreasing in several countries of the region, thereby contributing towards more gender equality in the economic field. Available evidence suggests that female wages as a proportion of male wages in manufacturing have been going up (see figure). Thus, in the decade between 1987 and 1996, some decline in gender-based wage differentials is evident for Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Thailand.
9. The growing participation of women in paid employment has contributed significantly to the economic and social empowerment of women. Access to earned income improves women's position within the household substantially, gives them greater control over the distribution of such earnings and household resources, and generally improves their status and strength in society as well as their own self-esteem. The ability to earn income from outside and to engage in activities other than household-oriented ones can lead to significant social change in the long run. Where women are generally denied the ownership of property and control over assets, the ability to earn outside income can become an important instrument for the transformation of gender relations and challenge many traditional modes of social and economic relations. Growth in employment has also led to bridging the gender wage gap, suggesting that there can be macroeconomic effects on the conditions and pay of women workers independent of any policy interventions. However, under the present circumstances, there could be several difficulties with relying on this process to reduce gender gaps in employment. The excess demand for labour that was being experienced in some of the countries in the region is likely to disappear and current trends indicate increased female unemployment, implying that gender-based wage differentials could increase.

10. Small businesses have emerged as significant avenues for the economic empowerment of women. The flexible nature of these businesses facilitates the participation of women in formal economic activities as entrepreneurs, managers and workers. They can be run with simple technology, and limited financial and managerial resources and often serve local markets, characteristics which favour women's participation in gainful activities. They also tend to be family-based, an important aspect in women's decisions to participate in formal economic activities. However, the effective participation of women in these businesses is highly constrained by their limited access to financial resources, marketing links, technology, business networks, and information on investment opportunities. They also face legal and regulatory obstacles in many countries of the region. Effective policies and programmes are needed in these areas to promote the participation of women in small businesses.

B. Improvements in social development indicators

11. There has been a gradual improvement in the social empowerment of women, although the base of gender inequality has been so strong that it continues to dominate the outcome (table 2). Thus, Asia is the only region in the world where the sex ratio (women per thousand men) continues
Figure. Trends in female wages as a percentage of male wages in selected countries and areas of the Asian and Pacific region

Table 2. Some social development indicators in selected countries and areas of the Asian and Pacific region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sex ratio</th>
<th>Fertility rate (percentage growth)</th>
<th>Female life expectancy rate (years)</th>
<th>Female adult literacy rate (percentage)</th>
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</table>

to be adverse to women. In some cases, the sex ratio has actually worsened in the recent past. Thus, in several countries in the region from South Asia (India and Pakistan) to East Asia (China and the Republic of Korea), sex ratios declined between 1975 and 1992. Life expectancy rates for women show an increase in most of Asia, and both the improvements and the absolute levels in this variable are better for the East and South-East Asian region than in the case of South Asia (with the exception of Sri Lanka).

12. Fertility rates have declined in the region, even though the total fertility rate and the average number of children per woman remain high (over four) in several countries in the region. The fertility rates on average remain high in those countries of Asia where female literacy is low and opportunities for outside work participation are limited. It is therefore increasingly accepted that, in addition to reflecting general conditions of economic growth and the availability of both health care and birth control facilities, fertility rates also serve as a proxy for women's general empowerment. This is because these rates are closely linked to the literacy and educational status of women, age at marriage, and other important features of women's status.

13. In terms of literacy rates, gender gaps across Asia appear to be narrowing, although the rate of change is still slow in several countries. There are also subregional variations, with Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in South Asia falling far behind East and South-East Asia in terms of adult female literacy rates. Sri Lanka bears some resemblance to the South-East Asian pattern. The changes in adult female literacy rates tend to be closely correlated with the outside work participation of women. Efforts to reduce gender inequality in education can therefore affect the paid employment of women with the greater likelihood of households investing more in the education of girls.

C. Access to technology, including information technology

14. Promoting access to productive resources and social support systems constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks in efforts to empower women in the region. Access to productive resources such as credit, technology, infrastructure, marketing links and networking facilities can significantly enlarge opportunities for women to engage in formal economic activities and improve their social status. In that regard, promoting access to new and emerging technologies, including information and communication technology, has become a powerful tool for women's empowerment.

15. The Beijing Platform for Action strongly endorses women's use of computer networking for the dissemination of information and networking in order to increase women's role in decision-making and their part in the democratic process. According to the Platform, the Internet could be a powerful tool for women to use in disseminating and exchanging information, as well as in gathering information. For example, Web sites could provide information on subjects such as women's studies, gender, feminism, women's health, and women in computer science, engineering, academia and industry.
16. However, the Beijing Platform for Action also notes that most women, especially those in developing countries, cannot afford to travel the information highway (Internet) and thus are unable to use it to access information or network with others. To remedy this situation, and strengthen women's participation in society, the Platform calls on organizations at all levels to assist in increasing opportunities for women to use computers and the Internet. Along with access, the Platform further identifies training and network development as crucial.

17. Electronic communication has increased women's productivity, given them more balanced information than the regular news media, enriched their understanding of global issues, and enabled them to meet people with similar interests and share information. Along with extolling the benefits women can reap when they go on line, an ESCAP survey showed that women continue to face barriers in using the information superhighway. These include lack of training, the high cost of equipment and, in some places, the high cost of being connected.

18. Obstacles to Internet use include lack of Internet-capable computers, language barriers, lack of expertise and lack of training opportunities. The ESCAP survey found that, as a rule, women's organizations in the region continue to distribute information through traditional channels - mail, fax/telephone, and/or person-to-person. While a few groups are using the Internet to find information, they do not use it for distribution. Also, Internet use by many organizations is restricted to E-mail because their older computers are not capable of other Internet functions.

19. To overcome the psychological barriers which inhibit women's use of information technology, training is seen as critical. Unfortunately, training programmes and materials are often not gender and/or culturally sensitive, training is expensive and it is often offered at the wrong time of day for women. To promote women's use of the information highway, training must cover basic skills such as computer operations and how to search for information, as well as the creation and maintenance of electronic information systems, and setting up Web sites and computer conferences. Ongoing user support and monitoring are also critical.

D. Mainstreaming gender concerns through national mechanisms and promoting greater participation in community-based and non-governmental organizations

20. Strengthening national mechanisms and promoting the greater participation of women in community-based and non-governmental organizations remain one of the major objectives in empowering women. In that regard, national machineries have emerged as important institutional systems for the advancement of women, with focal points as their primary components. International Women's Year (1975) and the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), stimulated the establishment of national machinery in most countries, but 30 per cent of Asian and Pacific countries established focal points in 1985 and thereafter, with up to 40 per cent of them functioning without either mandates or vested authority. Decisions about structures and functions of machinery may either limit or enhance their potential for mainstreaming the advancement of women.
21. While the positioning of national focal points varies widely, Asian and Pacific countries use four major structures: (a) women's organizations; (b) women's commissions, councils or committees attached to the Prime Minister, President, Governor or Cabinet of Ministers; (c) women's ministries; and (d) women's units within one or more ministries. The majority of countries use the first three structures, whereby the focal point can access high levels of power and influence national decision-making. The remaining two fifths limit this access and influence to units in ministries.

22. During the last decade, many countries introduced major changes in the location of their focal points. Elsewhere, movement took place within ministries, and many focal points were relocated more than once. As a result, during the decade, women's units were incorporated in ministries simultaneously assuming responsibility in different substantive areas. These include social welfare, children's affairs, youth, sports, family planning, human resources development, community affairs, culture, justice, relief, resettlement, education, science, technology, archives, religion, teaching hospitals, interior affairs, political affairs, health, transport, the environment, population, labour, national unity and, finally, social development.

23. National machineries are becoming increasingly complex as governments supplement and complement focal points. Nearly 20 countries complement their focal points with subnational units at provincial, district or even village level. Women's studies programmes and research units are increasingly becoming major components of national machinery. Other integrative mechanisms link focal points among ministries and with communities of women and their organizations.

24. In addition, mechanisms organize input from concerned organizations, while others provide forums for dialogue and negotiation. Some even enable governments to access researchers and to elicit their substantive direction for the preparation of reviews and evaluations and the design of policies and programmes. Governments assign a range of functions to focal points, but four major functions are essential to mainstreaming: (a) research and policy analysis and identifying issues and concerns; (b) recommendations and advice; (c) implementation; and (d) monitoring and evaluation.

25. National mechanisms support mainstreaming at the highest level of national decision-making. They also create enabling environments for focal point staff to combine research and statistics with programme and project experience to furnish a solid foundation for recommendations to a predominantly male audience. But in many countries, skilled personnel are not available in sufficient numbers from within the civil service or as cadres of women's organizations to furnish such recommendations. While some governments introduce training to enhance the analytic capacity and gender sensitivity of their staff, it offers insufficient support for the effective operation of national machinery. For this reason, governments often establish new components with mandates for policy-oriented research and monitoring functions.
26. Dissemination of information forms another priority area of concern in strengthening national mechanisms. While several governments organized information centres during the last decade, these remain inadequate and often lack staff with sufficient training to use what is available effectively. Focal point initiatives on behalf of women are severely curtailed by inadequate information, especially accurate and timely data and policy-oriented research.

27. The advancement of women in development in the region entails the creation of an enabling environment. Focal points ought to be given mandated authority with primary responsibility for women. They should also be complemented with mechanisms that lend them assistance and access to power, information and support. Such an environment remains a prerequisite for women and men to work together towards empowering women.

28. Women's groups, NGOs and other sections of the civil society are also playing a vital role in empowering women in the region. Women's organizations have greatly helped in raising consciousness about the rights of women and drawn attention to the social and economic hardships experienced by them. These organizations, along with the relevant NGOs, have been campaigning for legal reforms and legislative changes for the betterment of women. Social development in general and human rights in particular form the broad frameworks within which the women's organizations are working in advancing the cause of women. As in most other areas, these organizations tend to be more resourceful and effective in the developed and more advanced countries of the region. In the weaker economies, these organizations need further strengthening in order for them to play a more meaningful role in empowering women.

II. SOME CRITICAL CHALLENGES

A. Asian economic crisis and the need for a social safety net

29. The ongoing economic crisis in several countries of the region has underlined the vulnerable situation of women. It has also severely undermined the progress made during the last decade in empowering women in the economic and social fields. Shutdowns and lay-offs in the manufacturing sector have affected many women, who have borne the major brunt of job losses in the affected countries. In all of these economies, female employment in the service sector is also being negatively affected, with older women workers the first to be laid off. Since the affected sectors are also the ones which had been employing more women, the rapid feminization of employment in many of these previously high-growth economies could be followed in the next phase of crisis and adjustment by the equally rapid feminization of growing unemployment. The economic crisis is also causing male unemployment. This growing male unemployment is affecting women directly, and an increasing number are being pushed into the labour market and accepting previously unacceptable work conditions owing to the pressure of declining real household incomes.
30. The current process of adjustment in much of the region is likely to have other far-reaching consequences for women, including loss of other sources of income within the household as the deflationary policies imposed on several countries of the region begin to take hold. It is now generally admitted that this deflationary package is leading to substantial fiscal compression as well as absolute declines in economic activity in several important subsectors.

31. The issue of large-scale unemployment is especially serious in the region as no developing country, except the Republic of Korea, has significant safety nets in the form of unemployment benefits or insurance for the unemployed. The newly unemployed throughout the region are forced to turn to traditional sources, such as the family. But family incomes have declined as all workers’ incomes are being substantially squeezed.

32. In addition, the current deflationary adjustment policies will affect women adversely, not only as workers, but as household providers, mothers etc. Women’s access to basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter, and to the provisioning of common property resources, could be curtailed. Their access to education and skill formation that allows them to move out of low-productivity jobs could also diminish. There are also serious implications for total household incomes in different sectors and gender-based distribution within households. As austerity measures begin to take hold, women could be required to spend more time on caring for the young and infirm as health-care facilities and other social services are reduced.

33. In addition, where many women have been forced in such circumstances to seek additional income outside the home, this has put pressure on girl children, who have to take up some of the activities of the household and child care otherwise performed by their mothers. In extreme cases, this has led to their withdrawal from schooling and other negative effects. Other negative features which have a gender dimension associated with structural adjustment programmes are in the area of food security - a critical issue throughout South Asia, China and Indonesia, as well as other parts of the region. The emphasis on primary product export, along with cuts in food and other subsidies typical of such structural packages, lead almost axiomatically to increases in the relative price of food and therefore put pressure on real consumption within households. It is widely acknowledged that in many Asian societies, especially South Asia, social and cultural norms are such that women and girl children face disproportionately excessive cuts in their food consumption when household per capita access to food declines. Where adjustment programmes have also tended to include effective cuts in public distribution systems for food and essential items, these place a special burden on females within the family.

34. There are also specific problems facing migrant women workers in the wake of the present economic crisis. In some instances, migrant workers could become the focus of local hostility with growing job losses. Returning workers face the added burden of re-establishing themselves economically and socially in their home countries. Measures such as forcible repatriation can become a
problem if urgent measures are not adopted to safeguard the interests of the migrant workers.

B. Empowering women in poverty

35. Significant progress has been achieved in alleviating the worst forms of poverty in many countries of the region through sustained economic growth supported by active and well-targeted public policy. However, the Asian and Pacific region remains home to the largest segment of the world population who live in abject poverty. Progress in poverty alleviation also seems to be uneven, with many countries falling far behind. Of the poor, women constitute the majority, with the number of rural women in poverty rising over the last 20 years by about 50 per cent compared with an increase of about 25 per cent for rural men. Recent studies also indicate that the proportion of female-headed households has been increasing and a disproportionate number of those households are among the very poor. In the context of this, the importance of poverty reduction as a tool to empower women in poverty has been widely recognized. The Jakarta Plan of Action accorded highest priority to combating the growing feminization of poverty. Similarly, the Beijing Platform for Action identified the persistent and increasing burden of poverty of women as one of the 12 critical areas of concern.

36. One of the recent innovations in empowering women in poverty has been the increasing emphasis on microcredit programmes and schemes. These have become highly significant in empowering women in poverty through the mobilization of asset-less women to engage in self-employment and income-generating activities. Microcredit schemes have, in many instances, demonstrated that the poor women are bankable and a valuable source for savings mobilization. Apart from the economic impacts, access to microcredit has had far-reaching social consequences for women in poverty. It has given rise to a new division of responsibilities within the borrowing families, with a greater recognition of women as significant contributors to family welfare. It has also improved the social status of women borrowers and attenuated the grip of patriarchy in traditional societies. However, these benefits and potentials of microcredit programmes and schemes have not been uniformly realized in all the developing countries of the region. Important issues have remained unanswered, with the growing realization that not all microcredit programmes and schemes are succeeding in incorporating gender issues effectively to promote the social and economic empowerment of women in poverty.

37. The importance of poverty reduction as a goal to empower women has been widely recognized. However, in spite of the preponderance of the poor being female and the increasing feminization of poverty, anti-poverty interventions have tended to be gender-blind, or at best gender-neutral, in needs identification, project design and implementation. Most countries lack a coherent, balanced agenda for combating female poverty. It is therefore important that poverty reduction strategies be approached from a gender perspective and that the underlying causes of female poverty be addressed and measures to empower women to combat poverty be undertaken.
C. Promotion of women's rights as human rights

38. The promotion of women's rights as human rights was one of the main objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. In that context, ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has become an important instrument in empowering women in the region. As of January 1999, the Convention had been ratified by over two thirds of ESCAP members and associate members. Of those, nearly one third have entered reservations for reasons of religion, culture and conflict of law. Such reservations and/or declarations effectively dilute the human rights standards set by the Convention for women in those countries and also for the region. Even where ratification has been without reservation, implementation has been slow in a number of countries, thereby allowing existing discriminatory practices against women to continue under the sanction of religious principles or cultural and customary values. Given the differences and the degree of sensitivities posed by the cultural and religious particularities of individual countries of subregions, a rights-based approach to gender equality may provide some common ground which can yield positive results.

39. In recent years, trafficking in women has attracted a great deal of attention. It is now widely seen as one of the worst forms of the violation of women's rights as human rights. It has become a serious problem without borders, affecting countries within Asia as well as other parts of the world. Women have been trafficked for prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation such as sex tourism and pornography, domestic workers, labourers in sweatshops and on construction sites, as beggars and brides. The increasing use of new information technologies, in particular, the Internet, presents a new dimension to the problem faced. Poverty and economic deprivation have also subjected women to trafficking. In many instances, trafficked women are becoming victims of highly organized networks. Women victims in these situations lack legal protection and legal rights. Although reporting on the problem has increased, it is unclear whether this is a reflection of a growing problem or whether it is the result of increased attention to the problem at the national, regional and international levels. Quantitative estimates of the dimensions of the problem are not available as there are almost no reliable estimates, although many countries are beginning to compile information on the problem. The General Assembly, in its resolution 52/98 of 12 December 1997, emphasized the need for more concerted and sustained national, regional and international action over the alarming levels of trafficking in women and girls.

40. In terms of the regional response to the crisis to date, the draft South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) convention on preventing and combating trafficking in women and children for prostitution is scheduled to be signed by SAARC member States in 1999. The draft convention seeks to promote cooperation amongst SAARC member States to deal effectively with the various aspects of prevention, interdiction and suppression of trafficking in women and children; as well as the repatriation and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking; and prevent the use of women and children in international prostitution networks, particularly where the countries of the SAARC region are countries of origin, transit and destination. The positive response by SAARC States demonstrates
that there is political readiness to realize joint action to suppress trafficking in the subregion.

41. It is widely hoped that the SAARC model can be replicated regionwide. The experiences of the SAARC countries as well as the experience in drafting the Hague Ministerial Declaration on European Guidelines for Effective Measures to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation in April 1997 could be reviewed carefully to identify the common denominators in the development of a regionwide response to combat trafficking in women. The adoption of the Bangkok Accord and Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Women at a Regional Conference on Trafficking in Women, held at Bangkok in November 1998 (see para. 47 below), provided the first step forward in harnessing a regional response to the problem.

42. Violence against women constitutes another form of gross violation of women's rights as human rights. It has become a grave social problem, requiring urgent attention. Although the problem in the region is not new, it has so far attracted limited social recognition and legal redress owing to the complexities of patriarchal values, traditions, norms and standards. Even laws often discriminate against women and offenders go unpunished. Violence against women takes a variety of forms, including physical, mental and sexual abuse. While many countries in the region are engaged in combating violence against women in cooperation with NGOs and women's organizations, there is a need for more cooperation at the regional and subregional levels, particularly in those areas which affect women from several countries.

D. Coping with ageing populations

43. As ageing in general becomes a major issue with serious social and economic consequences, the emerging challenge of a growing number of ageing women needs to be recognized. Several countries would find it difficult to cope with these consequences. Declines in fertility rates along with declines in mortality rates and increases in life expectancy have created conditions in which the region's population can be expected to age rapidly. Sex differentials in mortality imply that the number of older women will be higher than that of older men. Ageing women are increasingly finding themselves having to depend on their children and other relatives for economic survival and social support. But with the declining importance of extended families and the absence of social safety nets, an increasing number of older women will find themselves without any economic and social support. Appropriately designed policies and systems are needed to cope with this important emerging challenge.
E. Promoting greater participation in the decision-making process

44. Promoting the greater participation of women in the decision-making process remains another major objective in several countries of the region towards the goal of empowering women. Awareness of the need for promoting the greater participation of women in the decision-making process is on the rise. In several countries of the region, women have reached the highest positions of political authority. Parliamentary representation is also on the rise in several countries. Yet, women by and large still find themselves excluded from the state or government apparatus in many countries of the region. Regional experience suggests that women tend to do better in terms of participation in the decision-making process when proactive policies are in place, backed up by a social consensus on the need for empowering women.

III. ESCAP INITIATIVES IN EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FIELDS

Empowering women in poverty

45. ESCAP accords high priority to empowering women in poverty. Following the completion of the project on improving the status of women in poverty in April 1997, a second project on empowering women in poverty was initiated, with the objective of formulating economic and social policies, including devising social safety nets and economic empowerment schemes, to address the issue of feminization of poverty. Under this project, a regional seminar is scheduled to be held at Dhaka in July 1999; twenty-two countries are expected to attend the seminar. An innovative employment promotion methodology is being tested to assist unemployed women with no income-earning skills to acquire the necessary skills. This methodology, called success-case-replication, uses local villages with successful enterprises to train the unemployed women in the same or nearby communities. The methodology is very low-cost and has generated an income of about 20 dollars for the participants for each dollar of investment. Bhutan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam are participating in this project. Another activity has focused on strengthening income-generating opportunities for rural women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Under this project, studies have been prepared in the participating countries which would be discussed at an expert group meeting scheduled to be held in Kazakhstan in 1999.

Education and training of women

46. A project on technology exchange for food processing and establishment of a database on grassroots organizations to strengthen women entrepreneurs was completed in 1998. It has provided hands-on, practical training and exposure in the area of low-cost and appropriate technologies in the food processing sector to over 130 NGO-associated women and men. ESCAP is currently implementing two projects to promote literacy for women in 3 subregions and 10 countries in the region. The project in South Asia, involving Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, focuses on post-literacy programme
development. The project in South-East Asia and the Pacific, involving Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, focuses on the capacity-building of local organizations engaged in literacy training for women. The subregional workshop held for South Asia developed a handbook on post-literacy programmes for women's empowerment in South Asia. The handbook was introduced to the four participating countries through national workshops and field-tested through pilot projects in 1998. The handbook will be finalized at the subregional evaluation workshop, to be convened early in 1999. Under the project for South-East Asia and the Pacific, pilot projects have been implemented in 1998 as a follow-up of the training courses conducted in 1997.

Violence against women

47. Government and non-government representatives from 14 countries of the region adopted the Bangkok Accord and Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Women at a two-day Regional Conference on Trafficking in Women, held at Bangkok in November 1998. The Conference was organized by ESCAP in collaboration with ILO, the International Organization for Migration, the National Commission on Women's Affairs of Thailand and the Asian Women's Fund. The Bangkok Accord and Plan of Action represents regional consensus on joint action needed at the national, subregional and regional levels to tackle trafficking in women. The adopted Plan of Action is divided into two parts, actions at the national level and those at the subregional, regional and multilateral levels. At the national level, comprehensive guidelines for action are provided in the important areas of prevention, protection and humanitarian treatment of victims, repatriation and reintegration, sanctions against traffickers, medical and psychological intervention, information and monitoring mechanisms and participation of concerned parties. At the other levels, provisions include the creation of subregional and bilateral treaties to set up frameworks for action, the promotion of more collaboration, coordination and cooperation among international agencies to maximize existing resources by avoiding duplication of activities and approaching the issue from new dimensions and perspectives, such as promotion of human security and combating and preventing organized crime.

Women and the economy

48. The second phase of a project on the promotion of women's participation in economic development in Indochina was implemented through the organization of a subregional workshop on promoting women in small business, held at Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, in October 1998. In this second phase, the workshop aimed at developing measures to promote women in small businesses by equipping them to undertake self-employment and operate their businesses more effectively in three Indochinese countries, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam. Representatives of governments, chambers of commerce, small enterprise promotion centres, Viet Nam based international organizations and women-related organizations attended the workshop and adopted the Ho Chi Minh Plan of Action for Promoting Women in Small Businesses. The Plan of Action called for concrete action in areas such as credit for small businesses, marketing, technology, networking, and
reform of the legal and regulatory framework.

49. A regional meeting on the impact of globalization on women was convened at Bangkok in June 1998. The meeting discussed the key issues and concerns facing women in a period of rapid globalization and analysed the effects of the Asian economic crisis on women. The meeting led to exchange of information on the needs of women as workers, home providers and care-givers during periods of boom and economic recession. The meeting also made important recommendations for consideration by policy makers and NGOs in formulating national recovery efforts to stabilize all sectors of the affected community.

Human rights of women

50. A subregional workshop on eliminating violence against women was held at Dhaka in December 1997 as part of phase two of the project on promotion of women’s rights as human rights focused on violence against women (phase II). Fifteen experts from governments and NGOs from six countries in South Asia participated in reviewing gender discriminatory laws as they related to women in the context of violence against women and trafficking in women and girls. The project aimed at assisting policy makers and NGOs in their consciousness-raising activities on violations of women’s human rights, with special emphasis on physical and psychological violence against women. Activities included the documentation of successful practices in the prevention and elimination of violence against women in the subregion and proposed recommendations to governments, NGOs and international organizations in increasing awareness about many forms of violence against women, acceleration of the formulation of laws on the elimination of violence against women, revision of gender discriminatory laws and strengthening networking among governments and NGOs working in this area.

51. A project on the promotion of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women through women in development NGO-networks in the Pacific is being implemented to facilitate the promotion of the Convention in the four Pacific island countries which have ratified it: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu. At this stage, national workshops are being conducted following the identification of national NGOs in the four countries. Efforts will be made to integrate the promotion of the Convention into existing regular programmes of NGOs and government agencies. The activities of the project will be reviewed at a subregional meeting of Pacific NGOs in 1999.

52. ESCAP also participated in a consultative meeting on the implementation of Convention mechanisms in the Pacific, held at Nadi, Fiji in July 1998. This activity was organized jointly by SPC, the United Nations Development Programme and ESCAP. The meeting provided an opportunity for exchange of information on the implementation of the Convention between the countries that have ratified the instrument, those countries planning ratification in the near future, and those contemplating ratification.
Data and information networking

53. Activities under the Women's Information Network for Asia and the Pacific (WINAP) network for regional information exchange continued through the publication of the WINAP Newsletter on gender-related regional programmes and activities on the WID Internet Homepage (created in 1997 as part of WINAP activities) and the WINAP Newsletter, which has been continuously published on a semi-annual basis.

54. Under the project on improving statistics on women in the ESCAP region, 14 country profiles on women were released in 1998, covering Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vanuatu. Two more country profiles in the series are expected to be released in early 1999, on Japan, and the Republic of Korea. As an output of the activities under another project on statistics on gender issues, six participating countries have published national statistical booklets on women and men. These publications have also been translated into national languages as part of the activities of the project.

55. A study, *A Demographic Perspective on Women in Development in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam*, was published in 1998 as part of the ESCAP Asian Population Studies Series. The study contains a summary and interpretation of recent demographic data and assesses the status of women in development in those countries, highlighting similarities and common patterns. The major findings of the study were presented at a Policy Seminar on Gender Dimensions of Population and Development in South-East Asia, held at Bangkok in September 1998.

56. Activities planned by ESCAP include a project on safety nets for women affected by the Asian financial crisis as one component of an ESCAP umbrella programme of activities to evaluate the socio-economic impacts of the economic crisis. The aim of the project is to elaborate options and mechanisms that have been tried and tested with a view to formulating regional guidance for the consideration of policy makers. Another planned activity involves a high-level meeting to review the implementation of the Jakarta Declaration and the Plan of Action and the regional implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which is scheduled to be held at Bangkok in October 1999. This meeting will assist the countries in the region in conducting their own appraisal and assessment of the progress achieved in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Jakarta Declaration and Plan of Action. It is expected that the high-level meeting will formulate the regional input for the global review of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2000.