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"The Beijing+25 Regional CSO Forum was held from 24-26 November, followed by the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Beijing +25 Regional Review, 27-29 November. These meetings saw a gathering of Ministers and senior officials, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other key stakeholders from across the Asia-Pacific region to:

a) identify key strategic areas and actions required to overcome barriers to gender equality and the empowerment of women;

b) provide a platform to highlight innovative solutions and exchange good practices and lessons learned on strategies for change;

c) invigorate the momentum to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women through increased engagement with stakeholders of different ages. Soroptimist International was present at the People’s Forum and took part in the Ministerial meetings.

Since the global call for action in Beijing in 1995, the majority of governments in the Asia Pacific have systematically adhered to international commitments, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1981); as well as other Conventions by integrating gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence. Furthermore, ratifying CEDAW suggests that countries in the region would have few reservations in embracing UN Women’s Strategic Plan 2018-2021 which outlines women’s economic empowerment as one of the key targets and indicators for progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Asia Pacific, however, continues to be a region marked by various gender inequalities. The CSOs present at the meeting highlighted that while some countries have achieved striking economic growth in the past 25 years, there continues to be many in which economic inequality persists, with many among the poor being women, especially those from rural areas. Despite the progress women and girls have achieved in the region, it must be recognised that as a collective, women are still left behind in many arenas. While in the field of education and health, there have been achievements and gaps have been closed; there are still countries in which maternal mortality remains a problem, reinforced by poverty and the lack of access to relevant and timely healthcare.

In one break out session I attended, the discussion revolved around the double disadvantage women faced in the region, especially among those with disabilities as well as those whose sexual orientation differs from the majority. In a climate of conservatism with cultural injunctions around virginity and purity, it is not surprising that sexual and reproductive rights continue to be an issue. Schools continue to lack comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, leading to rising pregnancy among teens in some countries.

The emphasis on women as a diverse group was also raised in a forum on land rights. There was an overt recognition that women tended to be worse off economically compared to men, especially among our rural sisters; because of a lack of having land rights. While men have the advantage of not only possessing land rights but also the right to sell land (because civil law does not recognise women’s rights in this regard). Land grabbing and its impact on poor women was also an issue discussed; land grabbing can involve fighting against the military as well as corporate businesses. As a Soroptimist, I raised the point about the expansion of palm oil plantations and its negative impact on the indigenous/minority women of Sawararak, Malaysia among whom shrinking sources of food because of losing land to big corporations have had a dire impact not only on these women, but also their families/children.
In another breakout session, the lens shifted on the experiences of young women in Southeast Asia. Some striking issues which were discussed were the anxiety millennials felt in the job market and increasing precarity, especially with rising inflation and the emergence of the gig economy; the persistence of degrading depictions of women in the media; rape and sexual harassment in public spaces and the lack of legislation protecting women; lack of access to reproductive health services because of religious injunctions on sexuality and reproduction; and that men/boys are not sufficiently engaged in advocacy for women’s rights.

In the breakout session on women’s rights in the Asia Pacific, the lack of gender friendly governments was identified as a barrier to achieving gender equality; and the continued importance of women’s movements to push for the gender agenda and, in turn, the 2030 Agenda. That rape in a marital relationship is not criminalised in the region is revealing of the extent to which religious conservatism continues to be a road block to gender equality in the family; and bringing in women as equal partners in the development process. Other harmful traditional practices in the region were discussed: and it seemed that Muslim women often do not reap the de facto protections that non-Muslim women enjoy.

Other barriers to achieving the vision of Beijing Platform were discussed: the two overarching factors singled out were the persistence of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism; both highlighted as being responsible for women’s exploitation and low status. If development were to be shrouded by justice, it was concluded that gender equality would be more achievable.

The presentations of the speakers at the Ministerial Meeting on the first day were also insightful on the progress women have made since 1995. Although slow and uneven, progress has been made, especially in the area of education. The National Review Reports of 41 countries in the region, as pointed out by another speaker, demonstrates national commitment, priorities and interests in the gender agenda in reducing inequalities. On a positive note, regional trends show that governments in the Asia Pacific have removed discriminatory legislations. Gender parity in the area of education has also been achieved by a large majority of countries.

But on the downside, as one speaker pointed out, the persistence of gender stereotypes continues to be one of the greater barriers to attaining gender equality. Electoral politics, for example, is one arena in which women’s numbers fall short significantly of men’s because of stereotypes that women are unfit to take on public roles because they lack the relevant skills; maybe too emotional and only excel in grassroots or community politics because of their strong social skills. That women continue to be victims of violence in the private sphere and in situations of armed conflict also demonstrate the persistence of inequality. Females are also way behind males in reading STEM subjects and the STEM sectors; including finance and ICT. Moreover, a persistent obstacle is care work: seen largely as women’s work and conducted in accordance to social norms; their role in the private sphere disadvantages them since they are forced to carry a double burden, impacting negatively on their performance in the workplace. Despite national government interests and their commitments in attaining gender equality, it was pointed out that gender budgeting was still lacking in the region and should be addressed because of its critical role in closing the existing gender gaps.

The last day of the Ministerial meetings saw a powerful statement submitted by the CSOs present at the meeting. In summary, the statement emphasised that the CSO community in the Asia Pacific were appalled by the fact that the intergovernmental process over the years has not fully committed itself to advancing diverse women’s and girls’ rights and that women and girls have not been recognised as equal partners in the development process; instead women have found themselves being “locked out of discussions that [have] affect[ed their] lived realities.” Moreover, women in
post-conflict countries are invisible in the peace negotiating tables: a critique was that “sexual violence, gender-based violence, targeted violence against the most marginalised” was not mentioned in the final document; and that women with disabilities were forgotten. Sexual reproductive health and rights has also been overlooked – an area which has long-term devastating impacts on the health and wellbeing of women and girls throughout their life course in all their diversity.

The CSOs present also reiterated the point that they recognise that the challenges in achieving gender equality require a holistic, intersectional and multidimensional approach. While recognising that the Beijing Platform is a comprehensive policy framework, the CSOs present took the position that they did not want “piecemeal solutions but approaches that transform women’s lives.

Moreover, they] do not want to be at the margins but [be] equal partners in decision making.” The point was also raised that since the Sustainable Development Agenda slogan is “leave no one behind”: this can only be achieved with “fairer models such as the tripartite structure of the ILO.”

Another powerful point raised was that the CSW bureau can no longer only consist of member states; but should include civil society seats. A strong point was put forward that while governments see civil society as drivers of change, they have failed to “safeguard [their] rights or to listen to women and girls in all their diversities. [Moreover, governments] have failed to act on a planetary crisis that is coming faster for all of us every moment we do not even recognise it … This climate crisis and emergency will not wait for another five years for the Pacific, [it] will not wait till the COP.” Governments may want “to erase women's and girls’ human rights” and “think they have the authority and the power” but they do not; since as a movement, CSOs not only represent the people; but are “the people.”

On a crucial learning lesson for SI: I was inspired with the interactions I had with the representatives from the various CSOs present at the meeting – primarily, the depth of their work and the fight they endured in view of transforming the lives of women and girls. The work of nearly all the CSOs present tended to be focused on one or two key issues. If we could identify those one or two areas which differentiate ourselves as an international organization from all the other CSOs (I am thinking here of our projects related to climate change and the environment, including access to safe drinking water and water conservation) operating in the Asia Pacific, I am confident that SI will be able to make a greater (and impressive) difference at the various levels we serve: global, regional, national and community.”