

## Where's the power in women's empowerment?

### ***A Forum by ESCAP – presenting the Research Program Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC)***

Venue: UN Convention Centre, Bangkok, Thailand

Time and Date: 10:00 am to 12:30 noon, Monday, 4 August 2008

#### **I. Background**

This year's 52nd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which focused on financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women, produced at least twenty-six recommendations, with none specifically addressing the power relations that disempower women. Without fundamentally restructuring gendered power relations, the mere amelioration of women's conditions only reshapes the contexts within which these power relations operate and is not sufficient to bring about women's empowerment. For development planning and implementation to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, attention must focus on the following key issues:

1. What does empowerment for women really entail?
2. Why must women's empowerment address gendered power relations?
3. To what extent do current modes of development thinking, planning and implementation empower or disempower women in relation to the power relations that shape their lives?
4. How do and can women challenge and even transform the power relations that disempower them?
5. How do and can women organize and institutionalize their initiatives for empowerment and how best can these be supported?

The WEMC Consortium undertakes cutting-edge research on women's empowerment in a range of social and economic conditions across various countries. Their research findings will be shared to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's empowerment in development analysis, planning and implementation for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The UN Millennium Development Declaration recognizes that it is necessary 'to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.'<sup>1</sup> Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3) is specifically to 'promote gender equality and empower women'. The target identified for achievement of this goal is to 'eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015.' The indicators for MDG3 are women's waged employment and political participation. These indicators and target are undoubtedly important as signposts on the way to achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment. However, it is crucial to realize that, by themselves, these signposts do not actually bring about gender equality and women's empowerment.

Even as attempts to measure empowerment multiply, discussions around 'empowerment' have become increasingly dissociated from the power relations that both locate women and impact on their lives in the real world. Much of development discourse tends to treat indicators such as

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 55/2.

education, health, employment, political participation, and so on, as the main focus of women's empowerment. In the real world, these are merely the indicators of underlying processes of empowerment and disempowerment carried out by human actors within existing power structures.

Women's relatively low levels of education, health, waged employment or political participation vis-à-vis men result from processes of disempowerment visited upon them by the power structures within which they are located. Increasing schooling and improving health indicators may enhance women's status but do not directly and automatically increase the power women exercise within the power structures they inhabit. Development interventions that effectively reduce inequities undoubtedly boost women's access to the building blocks of power. Supportive public discourses and laws do contribute significantly to making an environment that promotes women's agency. But these ameliorative factors only provide the conditions under which it may become more likely for women to assert their rights. By themselves, such factors neither change relations of power nor bring about women's empowerment *per se*.

Furthermore, there is sometimes misplaced hope that amelioration of one condition or other would constitute a magic bullet catalyzing changes in all other domains. Unfortunately, gains made in one domain do not transfer automatically to other domains, for the simple reason that different power dynamics may be at work in different domains. The key is thus to focus on actual power contestations, rather than just the contexts where these may contingently take place.

## II. Objectives of the Forum

1. To examine development assumptions implicit in the MDGs, especially MDG3, and to reveal the power structures that shape women's lived realities, often in disempowering ways
2. To engender understanding on what needs to be done to support women's empowerment initiatives amongst policy makers and implementers, donor partners, other decision makers, as well as opinion leaders
3. To contribute to the development of a growing knowledge base that will more effectively support women's empowerment initiatives
4. To contribute to the agenda of women as rights claimants holding states accountable for international commitments to women's rights

## III. Programme

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| 10.00 – 10.15 | Welcome remarks<br>Chair: Noeleen Heyzer<br><i>UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary, ESCAP</i>                   |
| 10.15 – 10.30 | Where's the power in women's empowerment and why does this matter?<br>Speaker: Vivienne Wee<br><i>Director, WEMC</i>           |
| 10.30 – 10.45 | Gender, Land and Property: The material basis for empowering women<br>Speaker: Bina Agarwal<br><i>Consortium Advisor, WEMC</i> |
| 10.45 – 11.00 | Violence Against Women: From Victimization to Empowerment<br>Speaker: Yakin Ertürk<br><i>Consortium Advisor, WEMC</i>          |
| 11.00 – 11.15 | Strategizing for women's empowerment<br>Speaker: Farida Shaheed<br><i>Deputy Director, WEMC</i>                                |
| 11.15 – 12.00 | Discussion   |