

Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions

Regional Workshop on the Role of National Human Rights Institutions in Advancing the International Human Rights of Women

Suva, Fiji Islands, 5th to 7th May 2000

CONCLUDING STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Participants expressed their appreciation to the host, the Fiji Human Rights Commission and to the Asia Pacific Forum. They also thanked the Prime Minister of Fiji, the Hon Mr Mahendra P Chaudhry for opening the Workshop. They expressed appreciation to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for co-sponsoring the workshop and for its participation and financial support. They also expressed appreciation for financial support to the Governments of New Zealand, through NZODA, and of Australia, through AusAID.
2. The Workshop affirmed the importance of international standards on the rights of women, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, notwithstanding countervailing cultural, traditional and religious practices. Participants urged governments of the region that have not become Parties to the Convention and its Optional Protocol to do so. They also called on governments to ensure that all international standards relating to the rights of women are effectively implemented and widely disseminated across all levels of society, with particular emphasis on youth. The Workshop called on governments to cooperate with NGOs in the preparation of their reports to CEDAW and to draw on NGO expertise in fulfilling their obligations to comply with the Convention.
3. The Workshop expressed deep regret and concern at reports of the increasing incidence of violence against women and children within the region.
4. The Workshop urged the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women to hold a meeting in the Asia Pacific region to consider reports from regional countries and to raise the profile of the rights of women within the region. They urged regional governments in a position to fund such a meeting to provide appropriate support.
5. In situations where the ratification, implementation and dissemination of, and reporting on, international instruments could be facilitated by technical cooperation/ financial assistance, the Workshop called on donor governments and international

organizations to support appropriate projects. The Workshop requested the Forum to research information on training and assistance opportunities that may be available through the United Nations or donor governments on these and other human rights issues and to provide it to national institutions, NGOs and, where appropriate, governments of the region.

6. The Workshop called on governments to create and/or strengthen national mechanisms for the advancement of the rights of women. It also called on governments to integrate gender perspectives into legislation, discussions that underpin industry and trade agreements and global initiatives considered by government, public policies, educational curriculum and other relevant programs and projects and to incorporate such measures within constitutional frameworks. The Workshop called on all governments to ensure that globalization takes place within the framework of the human rights treaty obligations that governments have undertaken to implement.
7. The Workshop urged national institutions and NGOs to monitor actively government reporting obligations under CEDAW and other international human rights instruments. The Workshop urged the two sectors to ensure that appropriate information is made available to the relevant United Nations committees and to be proactive in cooperating appropriately with the committees to ensure their recommendations are followed up and implemented.
8. The Workshop welcomed the establishment of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights in many countries of the Asia Pacific Region. Participants urged other governments to move quickly toward the establishment of independent and pluralistic institutions through an adequate consultative process with civil society and in accordance with the United Nations' Principles Relating to the Status of National Human Rights Institutions (the Paris Principles). The Workshop urged the Office of the High Commissioner and the Asia Pacific Forum to promote networks and financial and technical assistance that will accelerate this process.
9. The Workshop affirmed the necessity of cooperation between national human rights institutions and NGOs in the promotion and protection of the human rights of women and girl children. The Workshop recalled the conclusions of the Forum's Workshop held in Kandy in 1999 on Cooperation between National Institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations and urged both sectors to continue to take vigorous steps to promote and facilitate better cooperation.
10. Participants considered that an appropriate gender balance among both members and staff of national human rights institutions is important for the effective promotion and protection of the rights of women. The Workshop urged national institutions to review the issue of gender balance, and where a need for action is identified, to formulate and implement policies aimed at quickly redressing imbalances at all levels. It also urged that each national institution should have a focal point for women's rights and issues.

11. Participants also considered that, for national institutions to promote and protect the rights of women effectively, they needed to ensure that all members and staff are fully aware of issues in the areas of women's rights and are committed to pursuing them energetically. The Workshop called on national institutions to review their internal training programs and to provide effective training courses that will ensure satisfactory awareness of the rights and special needs of women. These should focus, in particular, on the institution's operations, such as complaints and inquiry procedures and practices. Training courses should also embrace equal employment opportunity and other gender policies within the institution.
12. The Workshop urged national institutions to pay greater attention to the economic, social and cultural rights of women, including shelter, food, water, primary education and primary health care as fundamental rights, as well as sexual and reproductive rights. This should include the collation and consideration of gender-disaggregated statistics and the recommendation to governments of suitable programs that are achievable, cost-effective and within a set time frame.
13. National institutions and governments should also ensure that national human rights action plans and other relevant national plans, in particular in the areas of violence and development, incorporate the human rights of women.
14. The Workshop is concerned that racism frequently compounds the discrimination experienced by women. Participants welcomed the decision to hold a *World Conference Against Racism*, in South Africa in 2001. It urged the Conference to recognise that national human rights institutions generally have mandates to deal with discrimination and other forms of racial intolerance and to consider ways in which the role of such institutions can be strengthened, in particular with respect to women and other groups within society that are vulnerable or marginalised.
15. The Workshop urged national institutions in the Asia Pacific region and the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions to give a high priority to providing material to the World Conference on practical programs and strategies to effectively prevent or combat racism and racial discrimination.
16. The Workshop welcomed the Asia Pacific Forum's emphasis on the rights of women and noted the papers on the issue prepared for the Forum's Annual Meetings in 1998 and 1999. It urged the Forum to further consider the human rights of women at its 2000 Annual Meeting in Rotorua, New Zealand, in particular by endorsing the conclusions and recommendations of this Workshop. Participants urged the Forum to continue working toward the development of a broad policy on national institutions and the human rights of women in the Asia Pacific Region.
17. Participants welcomed the Forum's decision to hold this Workshop in the Pacific sub-region and to invite participants from a range of Pacific countries. They also welcomed the priority that the High Commissioner for Human Rights has given to the establishment of effective independent national institutions and to developing

effective regional strategies. They urged the Forum to continue to explore ways in which it can enhance its activities in the Pacific, in cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner. In particular the Workshop:

- Suggested that the Forum invite Pacific Island governments and NGO representatives to participate as observers in the Forum's Annual Meeting in Rotorua, New Zealand, in August 2000;
- Requested the Forum to develop links with Pacific Island countries with a view to encouraging the establishment of national human rights institutions. Participants urged the Forum and the Office of the High Commissioner to assist Pacific Island countries to develop appropriate models for national institutions that comply with relevant international standards and are suited to the human and financial resources that are available;
- Welcomed the Forum's intention to develop guidelines on the establishment of new national institutions and requested that these be disseminated to Pacific governments and NGOs. Participants considered it important that the appointment of human rights commissioners should take place in accordance with principles of accountability and transparency, particularly with regard to gender balance;
- Requested the Forum, in cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner to develop and implement a program of institutional strengthening in Pacific Island countries in the field of human rights, covering national institutions, government institutions and non-governmental organizations. This program should include an evaluation of existing structures and needs;
- Requested the Forum to organize a workshop in the region on the issue of equal employment opportunity, including the issue of sexual harassment;
- Requested the Forum to arrange internships in its member national human rights institutions for young women from the region.

18. The Workshop expressed its strong support for the Fiji Human Rights Commission and urged the Fiji Government, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and international donors to provide increased resources to strengthen the Commission. Participants believed that the Fiji Human Rights Commission provides a positive model for other Pacific Island countries and welcomed the Fiji Commission's interest in and support for the establishment of national human rights commissions in other Pacific countries. The Workshop urged the Forum to support the establishment of such institutions by providing and coordinating advice and assistance. The Workshop considered that a useful first step would be the establishment of a Pacific NGO Coalition for Human Rights.

19. The Workshop recommended that the 'Women 2000' Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly recognize the important role of national human rights institutions in the promotion and protection of the rights of women. It urged the Special Session to recognize the importance of practical strategies to make further progress in implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Workshop called on governments of the Asia Pacific region to fully implement the obligations they assumed under the Beijing Platform for Action. The Workshop also called for

national institutions to be accorded an independent status to speak in their own right at relevant UN forums.