

SOUTHERN REGIONAL DEBRIEFING SESSION ON BEIJING+20

On 20th June 2015, EKTA Resource Centre for Women hosted the southern regional debriefing session on Beijing+20. The goal of the consultation was to bring together activists from across the southern states to discuss the outcome of the 59th session of CSW (the UNs Committee on the Status of Women), held 9th to 20th March in New York.

Hosted at ICSA, Chennai, participants used this opportunity to discuss the goals of Beijing+20, the CSW processes, and what the outcomes of the 59th session mean for members of global and Indian civil society. Out of this consultation arose a lively strategic session on analyzing and preparing a list of thematic areas of critical and immediate concern for women in India. Participants agreed to form State Advocacy Groups to hold meetings with experts across sectors to explore pressing issues related to women, review the National Policy on Women 2001, and evaluate and amend the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These meetings will bring together activists across sectors including agriculture, urban housing, poverty, SRHR, domestic workers, VAW, trafficking, mental health, child labor, child sexual abuse, women with disability, etc. The outcomes of these state-level meetings (potentially followed by regional-level consultations) will be consolidated by a National Advocacy Group for presentation to the Ministry of Women and Child Development. These outcomes should include a detailed policy review, comments on SDGs, description of women's on-the-ground reality and needs, and specific recommendations and action plans.

Part I: Introduction, Beijing PFA, Need for 5th Conference on Women

Ms Tamilmoni of EKTA opened the consultation with a warm welcome to participants from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Chandigarh. **Ms Bimla Chandrasekar**, director of EKTA, explained EKTA's motivation in hosting the meeting. She stated the need for greater dissemination of the processes and results of the 59th session of the CSW, which she argued has thus far been inadequate, particularly among the non-Delhi circuit. However, such dissemination of the meeting outcomes is necessary in order to draw diverse voices into thinking about how to move forward and to think about post-2015

targets and priorities. Ms Bimla also argued for sustained engagement with these processes, as complaisance is a constant danger and can lead to the concentration of prominent perspectives and voices.

After individual participant introductions, **Dr Ruth Manorama**, president of NAWO, explained the recent Women's Parliament, in which several members had participated in. Then, Ms Ruth explained the United Nations thinking about the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), historically and presently. She told participants that, in thinking about what next for the PFA, it is vital to register with the UN and attend its conferences when possible in order to make their voices heard. This is particularly vital, she argued, for the inclusion of marginalized voices.

Dr Pam Rajput, head of the High Level Committee on Status of Women, gave a summary debriefing on CSW 59th session in New York and the purpose and goals of the High Level Committee on Status of Women. Dr. Pam agreed with Dr Ruth assessment that substantial change will come from poor, marginalized voices. Dr Pam recounted the expectations and frustrations experienced in the national and international womens movement. Tracing the evolution of the UN four World Conferences on Women (1975, 1980, 1985, 1995), Dr Pam argued that the lack of a fifth world conference in the 20 years since the constitution of the Beijing PFA in 1995 demonstrates the weak intentions of international actors as far as women's equality is concerned.

Part II: 59th Session of the Committee on the Status of Women

Dr Pam Rajput, next shared her experiences at the 59th Session on the CSW, held in New York, March 2015. Focused on Beijing+20, Dr Pam explained that instead of giving a critical review to past achievements as well as strategies and targets for the future, the sessions seemed to be intended to serve more as a commemoration or celebration of the fourth conference in Beijing, 1995. She explained that a reported 8,600 women participated in the session, which featured 1,100 registered NGOS, 450 parallel events, an NGO Forum, and an evening march organized by UN Women under the slogan 50/50 by 2030. With some dismay, Dr Pam recounted that the CEDAW Concluding Arguments are often not a priority for governments or ministries. Furthermore, in response to government opposition and exclusion of civil society groups, a highly diluted political declaration was adopted the first day of the 59th session. This weakened declaration, Dr Pam explained, was stripped of

all human rights and sexual rights language and recognition of feminist groups, which have long kept the fire on the international community for prioritizing women's needs. Only the last two paragraphs outlined any concrete commitments and, on the whole, the document was unambitious and lacked orientation towards the future. Ultimately, its weakened nature depicted the rising international influence of accredited politically and ideologically groups from the right (from all different parts of the world).

Dr Ruth Manorama, Dr Pam spoke of a paradoxical disconnect between civil society members/organizations and the UN. Whereas there used to be a prioritized linkage caucus that brought activists together for networking, strategizing, and sharing, now these discussions are largely removed from conversation with decision makers. The ultimate result of this is a growing disconnect between the UN perspective and the on-the-ground reality, as well as obstructed dissemination of UN goals, activities, and resources. For example, Dr Pam explained that many do not know that violations of human rights can be reported directly to CSW (<http://www.unwomen.org/csw/communications-procedure>) **by August 1st**. The UN is not entirely to blame for the lack of political will and dissemination, however. Dr Pam argued that a new generation of feminist activists must be shaken to realize the importance of the women's movement, to get involved, and to continue to pressurize national and international bodies on gender equality.

Part III: Post-2015 development agenda & Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Dr Pam next explained the ongoing process of drafting the post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals, to be adopted in September 2015 at the Global Summit. When the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed, she argued, [NGOs/women activists] were not on board, and the resulting MDGs were minimalist. The post-2015 development agenda is very important, however, as governments and even the UN pay more attention to the MDGs than to the PFA. Therefore, it is very important and positive that women groups and UN Women have been very involved in the formation of the SDGs (currently 17 proposed goals and 169 targets), and the results of this can be seen in the zero draft. Whereas in the MDGs there was one goal on gender equality around only two issues, for the proposed SDGs there is a much more comprehensive goal concerning gender equality and

empowerment. Goal 5 states Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, which includes the following:

5.2 eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

5.3 eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations

5.4 recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

5.5 ensure women full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life

5.6 ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

5.a undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources in accordance with national laws

5.b enhance the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment

5.c adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

Dr Pam expressed concern that further ground work must be done to strengthen these goals before their finalization in September. While the goals currently say, this is what we want, Dr Pam argued that civil society needs to be involved to say this is what we need, and this is what to do. She called for the mobilization of forces at the local level all across the country, preparing lists of critical priorities by the end of July so that the negotiation process can begin in August.

Part IV: National Policy Review & National Advocacy Group

Dr Pam next explained that her immediate concern is to make grassroots needs and demands clear to the Indian government and the international bodies. As head of the High Level Committee on Status of Women, she is engaged with the ongoing review the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001 (NPW) and developing concrete policy needs with both short-term and long-term focus for the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Dr Pam invited participants to contribute to this review process and recommend necessary changes and critical priorities. She told volunteers that this presents an opportunity to form a National Advocacy Group and negotiate with the government in a democratic and transparent way that will create accountability on both sides. Although time is short, it is also an opportunity to mobilize and provide feedback for the SDGs before their finalization in September.