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**EMERGING ISSUES AND DEVELOPMENTS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL:
EMERGING SOCIAL ISSUES**

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EMERGING SOCIAL ISSUES: TRENDS AND APPROACHES

**THE RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Note by the secretariat

SUMMARY

At least since the international conferences on population, sustainable social development and women in the mid-1990s, Governments and United Nations agencies have been emphasizing a rights-based approach to development. This approach is people-centred and stresses popular participation in development, social equality and non-discrimination.

The ESCAP secretariat has assisted members and associate members in formulating and implementing policies and programmes incorporating the rights-based approach, particularly in the areas of gender equality and the empowerment of women, population, persons with disabilities, ageing, youth and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Governments in the region have recently adopted regional action plans in each of these areas that incorporate the rights-based approach.

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I. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

1. The World Summit for Social Development, held at Copenhagen in March 1995, the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action of the World Summit on Sustainable Development established a renewed consensus on placing people at the centre of sustainable development, with three overarching goals: eradicating poverty, promoting full and productive employment and fostering social integration in order to achieve just societies for all. The collective message of all the United Nations-sponsored global conferences during the 1990s and of major regional high-level meetings on development was an urgent call for people-centred development, new initiatives on comprehensive development, with a greater emphasis on social development and an espousal of the rights-based approach to development. The new initiatives on social development adopted by Governments in 2000 reviewed the implementation of the Copenhagen commitments and focused not only on comprehensive development and sustainable social development but also on the promotion of accountability, popular participation in development, equality and non-discrimination, which are key elements of the rights-based approach to development. They also addressed critical issues of equal distribution of wealth, enhancing people's capabilities, expanding their choices, social integration and the empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as women, older people, people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, migrants, gender mainstreaming, health and education.

2. In implementing its programme of work in the area of social development, the ESCAP secretariat analysed major social trends, emerging social issues and their implications for the region in the light of national development priorities, concerns and increasing emphasis by Governments on the rights-based approach to social development, particularly with respect to disadvantaged groups. Activities undertaken by the ESCAP secretariat in this area have included the provision of technical assistance and advisory services, the conduct of policy and analytical studies on critical issues on social policy and sustainable social development and the promotion of technical cooperation among members and associate members of ESCAP. These activities have brought about greater awareness and enhancement of the empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, their participation in society, equality, non-discrimination and an explicit linkage of these issues to human rights. The impact of the work of the ESCAP secretariat can also be recognized through enhanced national capabilities in addressing social issues and the adoption of national policies and legislation that address the concerns and well-being of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. The participation of civil society in this process was greatly encouraged and facilitated.

II. OLDER PERSONS

3. With regard to older persons, attention has been paid to three key areas: (a) the development and strengthening of national policies and programmes on ageing, especially those that promote the participation of older persons, and the strengthening of social protection/social security, health and

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care systems; (b) the promotion of partnership and collaboration between Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing ageing issues; and (c) the integration of ageing concerns into relevant development policies. Advocacy and raising awareness of ageing-related issues were accorded high priority. The Asia-Pacific Seminar on Regional Follow-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing, convened by ESCAP at Shanghai, China, from 23 to 26 September 2002, adopted the Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 and the Macao Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific 1999, setting out regional priorities and key actions to be undertaken to achieve the agreed goals on ageing. The Implementation Strategy addresses such important issues as the alleviation of poverty in old age, the promotion of positive attitudes towards ageing and older persons, the provision of quality health and long-term care, the protection of the rights of older persons and the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of age. Issues relating to older persons and the improvement of their quality of life were also addressed in activities under a project implemented by the ESCAP secretariat on improving access to social services by the poor and disadvantaged groups in Asia and the Pacific.

III. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

4. By resolution 58/4 of 22 May 2002 on promoting an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society for people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific region in the twenty-first century, the Commission proclaimed the extension of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002, for another 10 years, to 2003-2012. It also urged all members and associate members to participate actively in the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Conclude the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002, held at Otsu, Japan, in October 2002. The Biwako Millennium Framework for Action towards an Inclusive, Barrier-free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, adopted by that Meeting, serves as a policy guide for the extended Decade. The Biwako Millennium Framework emphasizes the rights of persons with disabilities by identifying such priority areas for action as promoting self-help organizations; women with disabilities; education; employment; and access to the built environment, public transport and information and communication technologies (ICT).

5. The Biwako Millennium Framework encourages Governments actively to implement the paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based approach to the development of persons with disabilities and to move towards the human rights perspective, especially the perspective of the right to development for persons with disabilities, bearing in mind General Assembly resolution 56/168 of 19 December 2001 on a comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. It is anticipated that a resolution calling for the implementation of the Biwako Millennium Framework will be considered by the Commission at its fifty-ninth session. In response to resolution 56/168, ESCAP is planning to organize a regional meeting to promote the elaboration of an international convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

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IV. POPULATION PROGRAMMES

6. Until 1994, the emphasis of most population policies and programmes was to reduce fertility and population growth through government-supported family planning programmes. To this end, many Governments adopted policies that stressed demographic and programme targets. At the International Conference on Population and Development, held at Cairo in September 1994, policy makers from around the world agreed that both family planning and social and economic development were needed for countries to achieve sustainable rates of population growth, protect the environment and enhance human rights.

7. Of the several principles on which the Programme of Action of the Conference was based, the rights-based approach has been given increasing emphasis for social development issues. For example, some of the underlying principles of the Programme of Action are: human beings are at the heart of concerns for sustainable development and people are the most important and valuable resource of any nation; advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, the elimination of all kinds of violence against women and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes; and the human rights of women and the girl child are inalienable, integral and indivisible parts of universal human rights.

8. Although it has been widely accepted that family planning programmes have been instrumental in lowering fertility in many countries throughout the world, there has been some disagreement over whether Governments or international agencies should continue to implement programmes to effect demographic change. New ways of thinking have emerged and a large number of countries have redefined policy and programme objectives and adopted approaches that aim to meet individual needs rather than national demographic goals. For example, the world's most populous countries, India and China, embarked on new initiatives that reoriented their national family planning programmes in the recent past. Governments have also begun to look more critically at the quality of care they provide. Governments agreed that population policies should address social development beyond family planning, especially the advancement of women, and that family planning should be provided in the context of reproductive health care, ensuring healthy and safe childbearing and preventing sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

9. There has been a fundamental shift in the approach to family planning services. The Programme of Action called for investments to improve individuals' health, education and rights – particularly for women – and for family planning services to be provided in the context of comprehensive reproductive health care. Subsequently, several countries in the region made important advances in promoting a quality-of-care approach to providing reproductive health services. Although many countries in the region retained numerical targets for family planning service providers, a number moved away from targets in response to recommendations contained in the Programme of Action. Examples of major and strategic shifts in policies and programmes can be seen

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from the programme in India, which has abandoned the target approach and initiated a needs-based, client-centred programme that calls for meeting individual reproductive health needs. In Bangladesh, a consortium consisting of the Government, donors and NGOs developed a new health and population strategy that complies with the comprehensive approach called for at Cairo. In an effort to revitalize the Government's family planning programme, China tried a client-centred, reproductive health approach in selected counties. Thailand has integrated HIV/AIDS education, testing and counselling into existing family health services. Other projects include innovative approaches to HIV prevention, premarital counselling and life-skills education for young people.

10. The Programme of Action also called for more effective population and development programmes while ensuring that they take into account the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society, including the rural population and adolescents. It stressed that population-related programmes contribute to the empowerment of women and improved health, especially in rural areas, along with other benefits. It called for particular emphasis on meeting the reproductive health needs of underserved population groups, including adolescents, taking into account the rights and responsibilities of parents and the needs of adolescents and the rural and urban poor.

11. Thus, most countries of the ESCAP region are shifting their population and reproductive health policies and programmes to respond to the needs of individuals and couples rather than to meet demographic goals and targets. Strategies such as the allocation of worker-specific quotas for family planning and the provision of incentives and disincentives are being abandoned, as they are contrary to the principle of a rights-based approach to addressing population issues. Accordingly, the Plan of Action on Population and Poverty adopted during the Fifth Asian and Pacific Population Conference, held at Bangkok in December 2002, has stated in its preamble that protection of human rights is central to human development and forms the fundamental pillar in the actions towards the alleviation of poverty and population policies must be an integral component of development policies and planning, and taking into account differential population and demographic dynamics and challenges, and such policies must encompass the principle of voluntary and informed decision-making and choices, the preservation and protection of human rights including matters related to reproductive rights and reproductive health as defined in the ICPD Programme of Action.

V. ELIMINATING SEXUAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

12. The United Nations Millennium Declaration recognizes good health as a basic right. HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are health-related issues that transcend the conventional boundaries of medical health. These concerns are increasingly recognized as development challenges. Groups that are especially vulnerable to these challenges are entitled to equitable access to appropriate services. Multiministerial and multisectoral responses are required to fulfil these entitlements.

13. Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and youth are on the rise in Asia. Greater local demand, the growth of the sex tourism industry and the persistence of poverty have all contributed to the rise in the number of young people whose rights are violated. Socio-economic and cultural factors, such as lack of education, family breakdown and poverty, make young people particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation in commercial sex work, trafficking and pornography. Furthermore, young victims are at high risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. They are also at risk of developing many other physical, psychological and emotional problems.

14. In pursuance of Commission resolution 53/4 of 30 April 1997 on the elimination of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and youth in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP has developed a regional programme on protecting the rights of children and youth from sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Documents on the outcome of regional and global conferences underscore the significance of ESCAP's contributions in this field and the need for its continuous role in strengthening prevention activities and service provision to facilitate the recovery of victims and their reintegration into society.

15. Secretariat activities aim to improve the quality of information and national capacity for strengthening policies and programmes to protect vulnerable children and youth from sex predators. These are pursued in close collaboration with the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) International, a leading NGO in this field. To promote synergy for maximum effectiveness, work is also undertaken in consultation with other members of the United Nations system, including the working group of the Commission on Human Rights on a draft optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sexual exploitation of children, the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF, the International Labour Organization and other intergovernmental bodies and NGOs.

16. The activities include a database on the commercial sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and youth in the region (<http://www.unescap-healthdev.org>), assessment of the extent of measures taken to stop the practice and the range of health and social services available to victims.

17. For the first time since the adoption of global mandates on this issue, indicators are being developed for use in countries of the region to measure progress (and gaps) on action to stop the commercial sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and youth.

18. ESCAP disseminated research findings and a film titled "No is Not Enough" to sensitize and promote awareness among government personnel and members of civil society, including youth NGOs and the private sector, of the situation of sexually exploited and sexually abused children and youth. ESCAP training materials were developed to enhance the capabilities of social service and

health personnel, through relevant gender-sensitive training, to assist young victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation in their reintegration into community life. ESCAP hosted and coorganized the East Asia and the Pacific Regional Consultation for the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children at Bangkok in October 2001, which preceded the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children at Yokohama, Japan, in December 2001.

VI. FIGHTING THE HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS/ ACQUIRED IMMUNODEFICIENCY SYNDROME

19. Groups that are especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS include youth, injecting drug users, men with multiple partners, indigenous populations and sexually exploited and sexually abused women and children. Among the conditions that increase the vulnerability of young people to HIV/AIDS are high-risk behaviour situations, such as those involving misuse of alcohol and other drugs, in a context of rapid social and economic change. Related factors include young people's high mobility, limited access to youth-friendly health information and services and low levels of economic stability and personal security in the absence of life skills to deal effectively with problems in daily life.

20. The Commission, by resolution 57/1 of 25 April 2001 on a regional call for action to fight the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome in Asia and the Pacific, specifically requested the Executive Secretary to support a wide range of HIV/AIDS prevention programmes for all vulnerable groups, especially those mentioned above.

21. Specific secretariat efforts to address vulnerabilities include youth life-skills training on HIV/AIDS issues and the training of social service and health-care providers. Training materials for social service and health-care providers on HIV/AIDS and its links with drug abuse have been developed and are in high demand.

22. In supporting Governments and NGOs in implementing HIV/AIDS programmes for vulnerable groups, the prevention of HIV transmission among drug users is a major concern. Thus, particular attention is given to exploring ways of tackling injecting drug use as a main mode of HIV transmission in many countries and areas of the ESCAP region.

23. Given the importance of forums for vulnerable groups to articulate their views on HIV/AIDS issues of policy concern, the secretariat organized the People's Forum on Partnerships to Fight HIV/AIDS at Bangkok in October 2002. People living with HIV/AIDS, sex workers, former injecting drug users and service delivery NGOs participated actively.

VII. EMPOWERING YOUTH

24. If youth are able to participate more actively in society, they can become more knowledgeable about their rights and become more responsible citizens.

25. The Health and Development Section serves as the United Nations focal point for youth in the Asian and Pacific region. In this capacity, ESCAP's mandate includes advocacy and raising awareness of key issues to which youth are most vulnerable and promoting their participation in decision-making processes.

26. At the global level, ESCAP serves as the regional arm for the World Youth Forum of the United Nations System, which also guides ESCAP's youth work. The theme of the fourth and most recent World Youth Forum, held at Dakar in August 2001, was the empowerment of youth to participate more effectively in every aspect of society. The Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy serves as the outcome document of the Forum to guide the United Nations youth work for the coming years.

27. The focus of ESCAP's youth programme has evolved over the years, taking into account the United Nations global priorities for youth as well as regional emerging youth concerns. In view of the urgent issues that youth in the region face, ESCAP focuses its youth work on the following vulnerabilities: HIV/AIDS; trafficking; sexual abuse and exploitation; and drug abuse. These issues are being addressed through (a) youth leadership development; (b) formulation and implementation of youth policy; (c) skills training in youth conflict negotiation; (d) combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation among youth; and (e) integration of critical youth health issues into non-formal education.

VIII. GENDER ISSUES

28. A rights-based approach to development emphasizes non-discrimination, attention to vulnerability and empowerment. Women and girls are among the first victims of discrimination. They are the most vulnerable and the least empowered in many societies in the ESCAP region. Denial of rights to women is common in developed and developing countries alike. In some instances such denial may be subtle, in others open and blunt.

29. Women's enjoyment of their human rights and the achievement of gender equality are the goals that have emerged as priorities in recent years. The denial of rights to women is clear from their overall unequal political, economic and social situation. Their unequal access to economic resources and opportunities and to participation in decision-making, their greater representation among those living in poverty, their unequal situation in the formal and informal labour market and their unequal access to land, property and credit are all indicative of the continuing lack of rights of women. Women's treatment under social welfare systems and their status and power in the family continue to be fraught with inequalities. For women and girls the level of illiteracy and nutrition, HIV/AIDS infection and maternal mortality rates are similarly indicative of the persistence of discrimination on the basis of sex, which entails unequal outcomes for them.

30. Women's well-being cannot be analysed without taking into consideration other aspects that also influence its level and quality. When assessing the effectiveness of a rights-based approach to protecting and advancing women's well-being, it is necessary to examine how to evaluate such well-being. For example, women's economic well-being may be best described by whether or not women have access to productive resources and whether or not they profit equally from their country's economic growth in order to maintain and improve their standard of living. However, the reality for women in many societies in the ESCAP region is that their access to productive resources is limited, if not denied, partly owing to a patriarchal mentality rooted not only in traditional cultures but also in development planning processes.

31. Social security, especially in old age, is another factor that contributes to economic well-being. The right to social security, including social insurance, is guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This again, however, cannot be discussed without integrating social and cultural influences. Even today, in many parts of the ESCAP region families prefer to have sons rather than daughters as sons are considered to yield higher future economic returns. It is the sons who are expected to take care of their aged parents because they are expected to have the means to do so. Viewed as economically non-contributing members of the household, women, including daughters, are not expected to have such means. In relation to security, the fact that in some countries women's rights to own land or property is denied by law adds another reason for son preference. With no registered title to land or property, women's access to credit and social security becomes extremely limited, if it exists at all.

32. Access to education and skills training, a right guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, is also an important factor in ensuring that women can improve their economic, social and political well-being. However, investing in daughters' education is not seen as profitable in many cultures and daughters are often expected to stay home to work on a family farm, take care of younger siblings or help their mothers to do household chores. Issues such as transport, freedom of movement, the community's traditional prejudice against women being educated and women's multiple responsibilities also prevent them from benefiting from opportunities for education and skills training.

33. The ESCAP region poses special challenges in working with a rights-based approach to women's advancement because of the diversity of cultures, social value systems and systems of governance in the countries that make up the region. Arguments of cultural relativism present a dangerous challenge to the recognition of the universality of international norms and standards on gender equality and non-discrimination, which some countries in the region largely consider Eurocentric concepts rather than universal ideas. However, the realization of the effectiveness of a rights-based approach in achieving gender equality has become apparent in recent years in the region

and efforts have been made to create an environment that is needed to support a rights-based approach.

34. Women in many societies of the region still do not benefit equally from social and economic progress owing to restrictions arising from social and cultural traditions that are too often patriarchal and male-oriented. The development process itself does not take into consideration women's human rights and the non-economic dimensions of male control over women. The assertion of women's human rights is necessary if women are to benefit equally from the development process. It is important to recognize that women's political and civil rights, such as the right to freedom of movement, freedom of speech and the right to vote, need to be guaranteed, protected and promoted if the full and equal participation of women in the development process is to be realized. Women's, as well as men's, economic, social and cultural rights must not negate their political and civil rights.

35. To protect women's rights, the international community has created specific standards, foremost of which is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. It entered into force in 1981. It establishes women's right to non-discrimination on the basis of sex and affirms equality in international law. Many countries in the ESCAP region have now ratified the Convention, a clear indication of the region's willingness to promote a rights-based approach to achieve gender equality. While the responsibility of implementing the Convention at the national level rests primarily with Governments, women in the region have themselves also been actively supporting a rights-based approach. They have been calling on policy makers to improve not only their socio-economic conditions but also their enjoyment of civil and legal rights. Their actions prompt a new direction towards attempting a more direct rights-based dialogue with Governments.

36. Given the differences in cultural and religious particularities of individual countries in the ESCAP region and the degree of sensitivities that they pose, it is clear that there cannot be one simple working formula for policy dialogue, but rather several formulations are needed. However, it can be argued that the realization of basic needs as basic rights, such as the right to life, food and education, could provide the basis for the development of common norms applicable to all women in the region, despite differences of ethnicity, religion and culture. Such regional dynamics as different stages of socio-economic and political development and poverty-level indicators also need to be taken into account. The recognition of economic and social rights as human rights and their practical realization have a particular significance for women.

37. A rights-based approach offers a possibility to break the vicious cycle in which women and girls are too often trapped. Because a rights-based approach is based on the non-negotiable understanding that women and men have equal rights and equal status, investment in girls' education, for example, is not made because of their economic value, but rather, because of their human rights. In a rights-based approach, a critical measure when it comes to investment is not how much economic

contribution one makes, but what are one's human rights. It is critical in a rights-based approach that such investments are not conditional upon economic value but upon human rights and human dignity.

38. Gender equality and women's full enjoyment of their human rights are thus closely connected. In an attempt to achieve gender equality, a rights-based approach can serve effectively. Its effectiveness will further increase when the means required for the implementation of the human rights norms, particularly at the national level, are put into effect. Most important, there should be no question of abandoning the gender mainstreaming strategy. Both approaches are not only compatible, but reinforce each other.

39. Unless the factors that obstruct women's full and equal access to socio-economic rights are an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, men and women will not benefit equally from the benefits being conferred. ESCAP, through its normative and operational activities, has therefore been promoting the concept that a rights-based approach should be incorporated in efforts to achieve gender equality in the region. A series of workshops to assist Governments in effectively implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women at the national level have been conducted. A number of government officials responsible for implementing the Convention have been trained on the Convention's reporting requirements and implementation strategies.

40. ESCAP has also taken the lead in facilitating the collaborative efforts of Governments and other concerned organizations to combat trafficking in women and children. A Resource Guide on Using Legal Instruments to Combat Trafficking in Women and Children is currently being developed and aims at raising the awareness of a variety of legal and international human rights instruments as they pertain to trafficking and how to apply them. Emphasis is placed on the trafficking of women and children as a violation of their rights, on the basis of the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is planned to use the Resource Guide as a monitoring tool and an instrument to harmonize anti-trafficking legislation in the region. A draft Resource Guide was launched and field-tested at three subregional seminars in 2002.

41. A study which reviewed the gender aspects and impact of social safety nets, with particular reference to the situation in the ESCAP region following the 1997-1998 financial crisis, has also been published. In the study, social safety net programmes implemented in Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand in response to the crisis were examined. The questions raised in the study were how well did these programmes serve the poor, in particular, women, were the programmes designed with a gender perspective and how did they benefit women, if at all. The study makes a useful contribution to defining future courses of action, improving gender sensitivity and promoting women's human rights in the design of social safety net programmes in the ESCAP region.

42. ESCAP has been promoting the importance of educating girls in the context of poverty reduction and protecting their human rights. Some countries in the region have taken special measures as part of their national development policies to ensure that girls receive education equal to that of boys. However, prevailing negative attitudes towards the girl child in some parts of the region prevent girls from completing basic education. An ESCAP project supports members and associate members in mainstreaming girls' education into their national development agenda. In addition, ESCAP has joined a regional initiative that advocates girls' education. This regional initiative was launched in response to the global initiative of the United Nations system to promote girls' education, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative.

43. As part of its effort to promote women's equal access to, and opportunities in, ICT and to ensure that they benefit equally from global technological advances, ESCAP continues to support women's organizations in the region in strengthening their capacity to network and disseminate information using ICT. Following four successful regional training workshops (Asia-Pacific Women's Electronic Network Training), initiated in 1999, two national-level workshops were organized in 2002, extending the outreach capacity of the training and thus increasing its impact and benefits.

44. There is growing recognition that the promotion and protection of human rights are central to the response to HIV/AIDS. Denying the rights of people living with HIV, and those affected by the epidemic, imperils not only their well-being, but their very lives. While the epidemic is increasing its threat in the ESCAP region, insufficient attention has been given to the gender aspects of the epidemic. Women may suffer differently from men because they are potential mothers and caregivers and they are more vulnerable to contracting the virus and to social stigma. ESCAP has initiated a process of examining the epidemic from a gender perspective. An inter-agency round table was organized in December 2002 and an analysis of good practices is under way.

45. Women's human security has been a subject of great concern in the ESCAP region. It is a major concern that in discussions of human security, the fundamental differences and inequalities between women's and men's security have been missing. Moreover, with the intensification of globalization, women have increasingly become victims of problems such as trafficking, sexual exploitation, irregular migration, violence and insecurity. ESCAP was a partner of the Asia/Africa Parliamentarian Forum on Human Security and Gender, held at Bangkok in December 2002, and coorganized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme. The Forum addressed opportunities for parliamentarians to promote gender equality in the framework of human security, in particular, through the implementation of the millennium development goals, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its optional protocol.

46. As follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing in September 1995, and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, ESCAP organized an expert group meeting on regional implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session at Bangkok in December 2002. The meeting discussed the development of effective gender indicators for the regional implementation and monitoring of the two global documents.

47. ESCAP continues its effort to mainstream gender in all aspects of its work. A series of training workshops to develop competence in gender mainstreaming was launched in April 2002, in keeping with the gender mainstreaming competence development framework, developed jointly by the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and the Office of Human Resources Management. The workshops aimed to strengthen the capacity of ESCAP to incorporate gender perspectives in its substantive work. Gender has also been mainstreamed in ESCAP planning documents and technical cooperation project formulation, implementation and monitoring processes.

48. The millennium development goals serve as an important guide to the work of ESCAP in achieving gender equality in the region. Goal 1 aims to empower women and promote gender equality. A majority of the poor are women and their access to and control over productive assets remain critically limited. While sustained economic growth based on good policies and productive investment may raise the incomes of the poor, growth alone will not redress social and political imbalances. In order to achieve the millennium development goals, women must be empowered to take their own steps to improve their lives. It is also necessary that Governments be willing and able to assist them in obtaining the support and services they need. ESCAP continues to support its members and associate members in developing and adopting policies and measures to mainstream gender and achieve gender equality.

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