

Multilateral Institutions in the Asia-Pacific and Their Women Empowerment Agenda

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It is an honour for me to attend the International Studies Association Conference in Hong Kong representing the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. I hope we will have a fruitful discussion today and in the forthcoming days.

Studying the international institutions many years I began to ask myself a question: why the recent decade witnesses a common trend of broadening women empowerment issues in the G20, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, Association of Southeast Asian Nations agendas? What was a stimulus for it besides a growing understanding of women role in boosting economic growth? What institution has made most headway? In my presentation I will try to cast light on these questions.

Initially, the women empowerment agenda was developed at the global level – in the **United Nations**, then coming into the regional agendas. So, the UN has organized four world conferences on women. These took place in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 that marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality. The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted by 189 countries, is an agenda for women's empowerment and considered the key global policy document on gender equality. It sets strategic objectives and actions for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality in 12 critical areas of concern, including economy.

The reviews of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action take place every 5 years. In the Asia-Pacific the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is responsible for the reviews and work on women empowerment in whole. So, in February of this year the ESCAP jointly with the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in collaboration with other UN agencies organized the Asia-Pacific policy dialogue on “Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work” in Bangkok concluded by recommending decisive measures to remove the barriers to women's economic empowerment.¹

Key recommendations made by participants include:

- Strengthening of normative and legal frameworks for full employment and decent work for all women
- Implementation of economic and social policies for women's economic empowerment
- Strengthening of women's collective voice, leadership and decision-making

¹ Asia-Pacific calls for decisive measures to promote women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/2/news-asia-pacific-calls-for-measures-to-promote-womens-economic-empowerment#sthash.4SLaGARi.dpuf>

- Mobility of women workers and particular needs of the most marginalized, including indigenous and rural women and girls, is addressed
- Technological and digital change for women's economic empowerment is managed and addressed
- Impact of climate change on women's economic empowerment is addressed
- Role of private sector and other social actors in women's economic empowerment are recognized and strengthened

In case of the **Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum**, the women empowerment agenda has been promoted mostly by the United States. Notably, on the run of the US 2011 presidency **the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE)** was established aimed at addressing the five key pillars impacting women's economic empowerment, including:

- Access to capital
- Access to market
- Skills and capacity building
- Women's leadership and agency
- Innovation and technology.

In previous years the APEC Leaders' declarations emphasized a need to enhance women's access to education, training, financing, technology, and infrastructure to maximise their economic opportunities. But no concrete initiatives were launched. The APEC Business Advisory Council didn't keep out and created the Women's Forum the same year with a focus on capacity building, collaboration and conversation. The Forum's key policy areas were in particular improving access to resources, eliminating discrimination in markets and the workplace, promoting greater awareness of gender issues, encouraging participation in APEC events focused on women's issues, and promoting the appointment of more women executives to ABAC, with a view to making it a role model for other international bodies.

In subsequent years, the United States has championed a number of initiatives through APEC on advancing women's roles in APEC economies through collecting and analyzing data, strengthening the regional ecosystem for entrepreneurs, promoting women's health, and advancing women and girls in traditionally male-dominated sectors, including science, technology, engineering, math, and transportation.

- **Women and the Economy Dashboard** which is a set of 75 indicators on the status of women in APEC's member economies tracking and measuring progress in reducing barriers to women's economic participation across abovementioned five key pillars.
- **Women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math)** which consists of an APEC-wide research study to examine efforts across the region to increase women's participation in these fields. In 2016 the APEC Women in STEM Framework was launched aimed at sharing best practices from across the APEC economies and recommending policy reforms for both governments and the private sector to increase women's participation in these fast-growing fields.
- **The Women's Entrepreneurship in APEC (WE-APEC) initiative** launched in 2014 which examines each economy's efforts with respect to business networks, private-sector initiatives, and government services in support of women's

entrepreneurship and **the WE-APEC online platform** (www.we-apec.com) which helps APEC governments, private sector, business networks and entrepreneurs to connect to each other.

- **Healthy Women, Healthy Economies** was launched by the United States together with the Philippines. It is a public-private partnership that is working to advance women's health and well-being to increase their economic participation. Through this initiative, governments and private industry joined together to develop a policy toolkit to break down health related barriers to women's economic participation, including workplace health and safety, gender-based violence, and work life balance.
- **Women in Transportation.** In 2011, the U.S. Department of Transportation called for a special session on women at the 7th APEC Transportation Ministerial. As a result, Ministers directed the APEC Transportation Working Group to launch a Women in Transportation (WiT) initiative to develop and implement actions that advance opportunities for women throughout the sector. The WiT initiative aims to recruit, retain, and promote more women in the transportation sector workforce and to make transportation safer and more accessible to women as users. To advance this initiative the Women in Transportation Data Framework was developed.
- **APEC sub-fund on women and the economy.** In November 2016 US Secretary John Kerry announced that the United States intends to work jointly with Chinese Taipei to support the creation of an APEC sub-fund on women and the economy. Through the sub-fund, APEC economies would be able to apply for funding to support new or existing APEC initiatives focused specifically on women's economic empowerment.

Second the most important integration initiative in the region of Asia is the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations**. The women empowerment issues are in the official ASEAN agenda since the ASEAN Women Leaders' Conference held in 1975. Next year **the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Women (ASW)** was established which was renamed the ASEAN Women's Programme (AWP) in 1981. In 2002 the on-going ASEAN cooperation on women's issues was restructured and called the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW). The Committee carries out the coordination and monitoring of the ASEAN's key regional priorities and cooperation in women's issues and concerns.

Since its inception, the ACW has come up with several projects, programs and activities for the advancement of women. Some of the ACW's major undertakings include:

- Capacity Building for Women and ICT in ASEAN
- Sharing of Best Practices and Expanding New Skills Training for Disadvantaged Women
- **ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs' Network (AWEN)** announced by Viet Nam at the 6th ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) meeting held on 7-8 November 2007 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. AWEN is a network of business women in the region, operating to exchange knowledge, experience; develop and propose initiatives to promote economic and trade activities in order to enhance gender equality, empower and strengthen entrepreneurship skills for women in ASEAN Community; create favorable environment for female-led enterprises and support for women entrepreneurship in the region.

In 2016 the 15th meeting of the ASEAN Committee on Women finalised the ACW Work Plan 2016-2020 which aims to advance women's rights and gender equality in ASEAN through regional cooperation. The plan highlights women's leadership, non-gender stereotyping and social norm change, gender mainstreaming across the three pillars of ASEAN, elimination of violence against women, economic empowerment of women, and protection and empowerment of women in vulnerable situations.

The third important regional mechanism is **the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)**. The CICA Action Plan for implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the area of development of Small and Medium Enterprises for the period 2016-2018 includes the section devoted to the women entrepreneurship. According to the Action Plan, the women empowerment in the CICA region should be promoted through:

- Holding of information and training workshops with the participation of well-known women entrepreneurs from CICA member states;
- Exchange of experience, establishment of business contacts and development of cooperation between women entrepreneurs from CICA member states;
- Exchange national best practices and knowledge on financial tools, services and resources essential to growth, security and prosperity of women-owned SMEs, for the example by running a workshop or organizing round tables.

To conclude, it could be said that the Asia-Pacific fora integrated the women empowerment issues in their agendas in different periods but the actions they take are similar and include predominantly sharing best practices through joint research studies, information platforms and events. It is good but what could be recommended is to adopt measurable national indicators and timeline to achieve them at the level of the leaders as the G20 did in 2014 when the leaders agreed to the goal of reducing the gender gap in participation rates by 25 per cent by 2025. The commitment adopted by a country at the regional level could significantly stimulate the national developments in this sphere.