

18th November 2008

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Department of the House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Attention: Ms Kerry Rea MP, Sub-Committee Chair

Dear Ms Rea

UNIFEM Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the review by the Human Rights Sub-Committee into Human Rights Mechanisms and the Asia-Pacific.

UNIFEM Australia is particularly interested in ensuring the human rights of women and girls within East and South-East Asia and the Pacific are protected.

UNIFEM Australia has four key strategic goals:

- reducing women's poverty and exclusion;
- ending violence against women;
- reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls; and
- supporting women's leadership in governance and post-conflict reconstruction

Throughout East and South-East Asia and the Pacific, widespread and pervasive human rights violations are witnessed. Many of these abuses are due to a lack of gender equality in this region, and UNIFEM Australia is very keen to see the Australian Government take a leadership role in this particular matter.

Violence against women across East and South-East Asia and the Pacific are at pandemic levels. A World Health Organisation report in 2005 found that 62% of women in Samoa had experienced physical violence by someone other than a partner¹ and in Thailand a large proportion of women "reported having sex because they were afraid of something their partner might do"².

In the Pacific region, particularly in Melanesia, women experience great inequality in the public and domestic spheres; many face extreme human rights abuses that affect them greatly in multiple aspects of their lives. In some cases abuses are long-term and systematic, in others random and opportunistic. In both cases the violent treatment can lead to injury, disability, mental health problems, STI /HIV infection and

¹ "WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women", WHO, 2005.

² "WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women", WHO, 2005.

death. Violence against women is not only a violation of human rights for its victims and survivors, but is a serious obstacle to women participating in and benefiting from community life and social and economic development processes and opportunities. It prevents women realising their full potential, and their opportunity to make choices and enjoy their fundamental rights alongside men. There is considerable evidence that violence against women worsens in situations of rural isolation and neglect, conflict and instability and natural disasters. The achievement of the broader Millennium Development Goals in areas such as HIV, education, poverty alleviation and governance is directly limited by violence against women.³

In addition to violence against women, the lack of gender equality in the Pacific has also resulted in the region only having 2% representation of women as leaders in local, provincial and national positions, the lowest percentage in the world.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on women throughout the region is also a result of gender inequality and a lack of understanding of human rights. In the Pacific rates of HIV/AIDS infection for women is increasing, especially in Papua New Guinea with an estimation of HIV infections increasing 30% annually⁴.

UNIFEM Australia recognises that the lack of human rights mechanisms within East and South-East Asia and the Pacific is having a dramatic effect on women throughout the region and urges the Australian Government to become a regional leader in relation to the promotion of human rights. Specifically, we urge the Australian Government to encourage the countries within our region that are yet to ratify the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to do so, that is Tonga, Nauru and Palau.

It is important to recognise that in order for the Australian Government to further its role as a leader in the region, it needs to show true leadership within its own borders. To demonstrate this, UNIFEM Australia urges the Australian Government to show its leadership capabilities by removing the current reservations to the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) including the reservations to Article 11.2 concerning Paid Maternity Leave and to introduce a paid parental leave scheme in Australia as soon as possible.

It is important to recognise that without guaranteeing women's human rights within our region, we will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

UNIFEM Australia thanks the Sub-Committee for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Yours sincerely,



Sue Conde AM

President
UNIFEM Australia

Submission authorised by the National Board of UNIFEM Australia

³ E. Cox, Regional Programme Director, UNIFEM Pacific Regional Office. Project Proposal submission.

⁴ Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, <http://www.afao.org.au/>, 2008.