

The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) has been working for the past 17 years to enhance civil society capacities to hold governments and donors accountable to their international commitments related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) with 26 national partners in 13 countries across the Asia-Pacific region.

The Asia-Pacific region, where we work, is home to 60% of the world's people and women; two-thirds of the world's poor;¹ 62.5% of the world's hungry;² and 42% of maternal deaths³ — that is 139,550 women die yearly from pregnancy and childbirth-related causes.⁴ We face continuing challenges in age-old issues such as maternal mortality and morbidity and access to contraception and family-planning, which continue to hamper the region's SRHR achievements and progress. Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia has the highest number of maternal deaths. Access to emergency obstetric care, post-natal care and the continuum of quality maternal health services are inadequate in many parts of the region, including South Asia.⁵ At the same time, an estimated 2.8 million women in Asia and the Pacific suffer from morbidity due to pregnancy and childbirth that in many cases remain untreated and cause lifelong pain and psychological suffering.

Although total fertility rates have declined sharply to 2.2 children per woman in 2009,⁶ women from the least developed countries, women with lower education, poor women and women who lived in remote, hard-to-reach areas as well as urban slums, have less access to contraception and hence, less control over fertility, and have more children than they actually want. Socio-economic inequities are closely inter-linked with higher rates of unintended births. This is especially pertinent in a region which has seen high but unequal economic development. The region still lags behind in access to range of contraceptive methods, and service provision guided by informed choice on contraception methods and information on side-effects. Trends of low condom use reflect existing gender power imbalances⁷ and unmet need for STI/HIV prevention is acute amongst married and unmarried people.

Demand for contraceptives is expected to expand as the regional population continues to grow from 586 million people in 2008 to 826 million in 2050, and a large number of young people enter reproductive age and become sexually active.⁸

Amongst the marginalised groups, it is critical to point out that unintended pregnancies among adolescents and young women in the region are high, with some Pacific countries having the highest in the world and with almost 1 in 10 girls becoming pregnant by age 16 in South and Southeast Asia. Many countries continue to demonstrate reduction in unmet need for contraception, however data calculations on contraceptive prevalence rates and unmet need, in our region, continue to leave out younger and unmarried women within their survey samples hence under-estimating unmet need and limiting necessary interventions such as accurate, reliable, comprehensive, evidence-based sexuality information, education and services to this critical group.

In the region, reproductive cancers are increasing. Every year, 265,884 Asian women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and 42,735 die from the disease. About 1 in 10 women are estimated to have cervical HPV infection. Breast cancer is the most common cancer and a leading cause of death among women. Yet, awareness-raising,

screening, treatment and care of reproductive cancers are hampered in the region.

Despite having 60% of the world's deprived people, donors seem reluctant to invest in the region – Asia receives the lowest per capita assistance of all regions - \$12 compared with \$45 for Africa – which calls for better allocation of resources.⁹

This will be a critical decision as the Asia-Pacific region faces many challenges.

One, the economic crisis is anticipated to result by 2015 in:

- as many as 892 million people in the Asian-Pacific region are projected to remain in extreme income poverty if current trends continue, with an extra 35 million in extreme income poverty¹⁰
- this will further exacerbate existing inequalities and inequities and negatively impact women's access to sexual and reproductive health including in current indicators including 1.7 million births not attended by skilled professionals¹¹

Two, we will also see new and emerging challenges such as disaster,¹² conflict and fragile states, climate change which will affect the region's poor disproportionately.¹³ In emergency situations, sexual violence against women increases drastically; to ensure a full range of sexual and reproductive health services for women within these contexts also calls for provision of emergency contraception and safe abortion services access for women.

Three, rising religious conservatism and the concertisation of the power of religious conservatives within the state, together with local contexts that drive this politicisation of religion, is negatively impacting the sexual and reproductive health of women, as well as their rights.

We hope that you will take this into consideration in your deliberations and ensure that:

- 1) universal access to affordable, quality, gender-sensitive, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services through functional and integrated health systems, especially for the marginalized and socially excluded populations.
- 2) the right to the highest attainable standards of health and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights remain a priority for women, especially marginalised groups of women, despite contexts of economic crises and emergency situations.
- 3) the international community allocates and fulfills adequate concrete funding commitments for these vital sexual and reproductive health and rights issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). *Paths to 2015 MDGs in Asia and the Pacific*. Retrieved 28 March, 2011, from UNESCAP Web site: http://www.mdgasiapacific.org/files/MDG_RegionalReport20102011.pdf

² Food and Agriculture Organization. (2010). *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2010: Addressing Food Insecurity in Protracted Crises*. Retrieved March 31, 2011, from ReliefWeb Web

Site: [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/ASAZ-89YHA7/\\$file/FAO_Oct2010.pdf?openelement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/ASAZ-89YHA7/$file/FAO_Oct2010.pdf?openelement)

³ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). *Paths to 2015 MDGs in Asia and the Pacific*. Retrieved 28 March, 2011, from UNESCAP Web site: http://www.mdgasiapacific.org/files/MDG_RegionalReport20102011.pdf

⁴ Unsafe abortion is one of the leading causes of maternal deaths in Asia, with as many as 24,000 women dying per year because of unsafe abortions in south-central Asia alone.

⁵ Thanenthiran, S; Racherla, S. (2009). Chapter 3: Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights. In *Reclaiming & Redefining Rights – ICPD+15: Status of Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights in Asia*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW).

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). (2009). *Population and Development Indicators for Asia and the Pacific, 2009*. Retrieved March 28, 2011, from UNESCAP Web Site:

http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/population/database/data_sheet/2009/Datasheet%202009.pdf

⁷ Thanenthiran, S; Racherla, S. (2009). Chapter 3: Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights. In *Reclaiming & Redefining Rights – ICPD+15: Status of Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights in Asia*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW).

⁸ Sciortino, R. (2010). *Achieving Contraceptive Security and Meeting Reproductive Health Needs in Southeast Asia*. Retrieved March 31, 2011, from Asia Pacific Alliance (APA) Web Site:

<http://www.asiapacificalliance.org/population-a-reproductive-health-archive/289-contraceptive-security-and-meeting-reproductive-health-needs-in-southeast-asia.html>

⁹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). *Paths to 2015 MDGs in Asia and the Pacific*. Retrieved 28 March, 2011, from UNESCAP Web site:

http://www.mdgasiapacific.org/files/MDG_RegionalReport20102011.pdf

¹⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). *Paths to 2015 MDGs in Asia and the Pacific*. Retrieved 28 March, 2011, from UNESCAP Web site:

http://www.mdgasiapacific.org/files/MDG_RegionalReport20102011.pdf

¹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). *Paths to 2015 MDGs in Asia and the Pacific*. Retrieved 28 March, 2011, from UNESCAP Web site:

http://www.mdgasiapacific.org/files/MDG_RegionalReport20102011.pdf

¹² With over 50% of the total world disasters, the Asia and Pacific Islands region represents the widest and most disaster prone continent in the world.

¹³ Climate change will affect almost all of the Pacific countries and many of the Asian countries with large populations such as Bangladesh, Thailand and Indonesia.

