



## CASE STUDY 6

### UN WOMEN: EMPOWERMENT IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

**Country:** 32 countries<sup>1</sup>

**Focus:** Women's empowerment

**Donor(s):** Various (governments, foundations, corporations, organisations and foundations).

**Organisation(s):** UN Women country and multi-country, and regional offices

**Budget:** USD 500m p.a. (UN Women)

**Timeframe:** 2010 -



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#### KEY POINTS

- Supporting local, women-led organisations to ensure ownership and sustainability
- Politically informed approaches are necessary to successfully work towards gender equality
- Local knowledge is crucial to identify allies, opportunities, and to strategically frame issues

#### OVERVIEW

UN Women Asia Pacific works in 22 countries, administering competitive grants through the UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality. The fund is aimed at "supporting and strengthening women's organisations as catalysers of change and as critical players to achieve gender equality and the sustainable development agenda", focusing on priority areas at regional and local levels.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it focuses on women's economic and political empowerment, as well as "ending violence against women, addressing harmful practices based on gender stereotypes and advancing peace and security."<sup>3</sup> Activities include the creation and amendment of relevant legislation; supporting female political candidates and representatives; recruiting male champions for gender equality; improving access to public services; and research, analysis and awareness campaigns.

#### GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goal Five—to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls—form the framework for all of UN Women's overall goals and outputs.

The Fund for Gender Equality places great emphasis on supporting local women-led organisations to become effective advocates for change. Firstly, by ensuring partner organisations are both locally staffed and take a gender aware approach: "The management of the organisation has to be more than 50 percent women, and international organisations cannot apply."<sup>4</sup> In addition to financial support, the program "provides technical support in terms of helping these organisations polish their project documents and strengthen their theory of change".<sup>5</sup>

## POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

UN Women Asia Pacific is also informed by regional demographic trends, resulting in an approach which addresses gender in combination with other identity categories or barriers to equality. For example: "Throughout the Asia Pacific region, demographic trends require the expansion of the care economy, resulting in gendered migration. This means more marginalised women, so you have to look at the issue through the lens of gender, as well as class, ethnicity and marginalisation."<sup>6</sup>

One way in which the program has addressed this has been by working to secure legislation to improve the rights of female migrant workers in the Philippines. This was achieved by a variety of measures. Firstly, "we brought together key officials, particularly senior legislative staff in the House and the Senate, and civil society and women's groups".<sup>7</sup> Secondly, "by building a partnership with the House of Representatives' Committee on Overseas Workers - which was instrumental in driving the CEDAW-based legislative review of the bill in the House - and then by working with the Senate on its passage".<sup>8</sup>

*"In certain contexts we have worked on issues such as health or livelihood in order to gain trust before talking about gender equality and power relations."*

## GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

In addition to working towards gender equality through legislative change, the program has also focused on empowering women as leaders, and young women in particular. For example, UN Women Pacific has partnered with women's networks in Lao PDR, Malaysia, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam to train young women to advocate for CEDAW and human rights.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it is working at multiple levels by seeking legislative change in the immediate term, and investing in a pipeline of female leaders to effect change in the longer term.

## POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

UN Women Asia Pacific demonstrates a politically informed approach by, for example, focusing on the local context, engaging with men and boys and power brokers who may not be obvious allies, and framing issues carefully.

Focusing on the importance of local knowledge has enhanced program effectiveness in several ways.

Firstly: "Locally led organisations generate more relevant results to the local contexts because they know the people and the issues." Secondly, this generates a sense of ownership: "If we were to produce, for example, a knowledge product, without people

owning it, it wouldn't have the same impact. Instead we invest in multi stakeholder consultations, and even though we are there to drive the political agenda, this is done in a manner that [makes] people feel that they are consulted and are truly part of the process to influence change that they also envision."<sup>10</sup> This sense of ownership in turn makes the program more sustainable: "Having the ownership of local actors and institutionalising activities through local partners helps to ensure the sustainability of the project and the results in the long run."<sup>11</sup>

The program's politically informed approach is also exemplified by its work with men and boys, as well as other power brokers. In particular, the 'He for She' campaign "has played an important role in reaching a wide audience [...] It's not necessary that we only work with women and girls. Men and boys are equally important, and without their support and promotion, this wouldn't be possible".<sup>12</sup> As demonstrated by UN Women Asia Pacific's work on migration in the Philippines, the program also operates by building alliances for change by engaging influential actors at the local level: "The nuance is how to get the people who are not usually doing gender mainstreaming on your side. For example, critical law-making bodies who may not typically be our allies."<sup>13</sup>

Careful framing of issues has been crucial to bringing possible opponents on board: "Whatever you are doing, you have to ask: how can I turn scepticism into the realisation that our aims might be in someone's interests. This is how to create ownership among those who are not natural allies." For example, "Sometimes stakeholders and government are sensitive to words like 'human rights' and 'gender equality'. In certain contexts we have worked on issues such as health or livelihood in order to gain trust before talking about gender equality and power relations. It really depends on who your beneficiary and donors are. You have to work on a case-by-case basis to identify the best strategy."<sup>14</sup>

1. <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries>
2. [www.unwomen.org/fge](http://www.unwomen.org/fge)
3. <http://www.unwomen-asiapacific.org/Annual-Report/2015/assets/UNW-AP-Annual-report-r12m-clipcc.pdf> (p.5)
4. Key informant, 09.03.2017
5. Key informant, 09.03.2017
6. Key informant, 01.03.2017
7. <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2016/12/philippine-workers-overseas-now-living-mores-securely>
8. Ibid
9. <http://www.unwomen-asiapacific.org/Annual-Report/2015/assets/UNW-AP-Annual-report-r12m-clipcc.pdf> (p.10)
10. Key informant, 01.03.2017
11. Key informant, 01.03.2017
12. Key informant, 09.03.2017
13. Key informant, 01.03.2017
14. Key informant, 01.03.2017
15. Key informant, 01.03.2017
16. Key informant, 01.03.2017
17. Key informant, 01.03.2017
18. Key informant, 01.03.2017
19. Key informant, 09.03.2017

This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at [dlprog.org/gapp](http://dlprog.org/gapp).

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The success of this approach is dependent in part on local knowledge. For example: “We are strategic about looking at what is the current momentum in a country, and leveraging a common agenda that matters to ordinary people. That is the way to create a political momentum with a sense of urgency to engage key local actors, including governments to address the challenge in the country context. We can turn those events into something positive by helping to address the problem.”<sup>15</sup> This is also an example of a degree of political opportunism and the ability to capitalise on critical junctures: “There isn’t always an obvious pathway to how you get to where you want to be, because you have to manoeuvre within the existing political landscape.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

Rather than highlighting convergence or tension between politically informed and gender aware approaches, the case of UN Women Asia Pacific underscores the necessity of politically informed approaches for successful work towards gender equality. For example: “There is the practical problem that developing countries have limited resources and so much to do. Local governments often have so much on their plates already. It is therefore important to help them to see the convergence of issues.”<sup>17</sup> Careful framing and alignment of interests is one way the program has addressed these difficulties: “You have to convince authorities that adding a gender lens is efficient rather than more work. This means you often have to act like you are not a gender advocate in order to get your gendered aims. If you come on too strong, people will shut the door on you.”<sup>18</sup>

Cover photos:

Un Women Asia, Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Pornvit Visitoran



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## EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Key factors contributing to the success of UN Women Asia Pacific’s work include its focus on local ownership and therefore on sustainability, building relationships beyond natural allies, and ensuring that the many activities it supports are complementary. In addition, interviewees point to the relevance and quality of program design and implementation: “Close monitoring is important to ensure that grantees have the necessary capacity. Sometimes we are able to provide additional support in the form of access to government officials or partners that the grantee alone would have difficulty accessing, so we are bridging and facilitating to make things work for them.”<sup>19</sup>

## METHODS

A rapid review of select program documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. Informants include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case took place on 01.03.2017 and 09.03.2017.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

<http://www.unwomen-asiapacific.org>

