

PublicationDate: 21-07-2001  
PAGE: 08

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST  
KEYWORD: disabled

HEADLINE: Differently able

SUBHEADLINE: Women with disabilities from throughout the Asian region were invited to participate in a recent summit held in Thailand \_ and the future looks brighter

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"Women with disabilities bear two burdens," some say at the risk of ruffling feathers; being the weaker sex primarily and then a certain handicap on top of that. But what if these two "flaws" were assets?

That was the belief of most participants at the recent Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors held late last month in Phitsanulok.

They were strengthened by the sight of so many outstanding female participants with disabilities or "special needs", taking part in the summit. "This group is value added to the summit," said Yutaka Takamine, project expert on disability at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Escap), which is based in Bangkok.

"The gender issue already receives a lot of attention. But we feel that women with disabilities have not been part of the process."

To redress the balance, the organisers of the four-day summit aimed at increasing the awareness of women's transformative role in local government, paving the way for representatives from various disabled women's associations to attend. Representatives came from India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Fiji, Indonesia and Thailand.

Ten women with various disabilities took part in the meeting, all models of dynamism and full of fighting spirit to defend the rights of people with special needs.

As part of the "Regional Training Workshop on the Inclusion of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Mainstream Gender Equality Initiatives" organised by Escap's Social Development Division, a three-day preparation seminar and advocacy training was held before the main summit to acquaint delegates with the agenda.

"We might be tagged as very ambitious but we take the summit as a platform for discussion," said India's representative, Anuradha Mohit, who is blind.

"It is so important to give disabled people a chance to work," said Miraflor N. Rico, herself a trained civil engineer from the Philippines city of Cagayan de Oro, where she supervises building plans to ensure they abide by accessibility laws.

"There are government funded schools and a few laws to help disabled people but the main concern is what happens after school. How do they get real employment?" asked Panomwan Bootem, president of the National Association of the Deaf in Thailand.

Speaking through sign language, she deplored the lack of interpreters and the information and communication void deaf and mute people have to endure.

Another delegate from the association, Malinee Chandratitaya, said training for self-sufficiency should be provided for people with disabilities. "We need \_ at the very least \_

compulsory education and the opportunity to earn some income in order to have a productive life," she said.

`` Parents in Thailand usually keep disabled kids at home, they don't send them to school or if they do, only for a short while. That leads (such children) to feel very frustrated and develop emotional and mental problems."

Expressing herself with the help of an interpreter, Malinee explained she was often heartbroken hearing about so many cases of poor up-country kids with disabilities deprived of education, training and any ability to communicate with the outside world, and on top of that \_although most cases go unreported \_ victims of physical and mental abuse.

The group's overall wish to be part of the working population is surely indicative of a growing global trend towards more equitable societies and the recognition of disability as `` a normal matter, something which could happen to anybody", as Clinton E. Rapley, the UN's Senior Social Affairs Officer from New York, noted.

`` In general in the past five years, throughout the world we have seen some phenomenal developments, with more results still to come in the next two or three years. Many people are active and trying to do something to improve the lot of people with disabilities, and most importantly, looking at disabled people as people, not charity cases. We have come a long way from that,' Mohit said, referring to international agreements such as the UN Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002.

After a few fruitful roundtable discussions, video presentations and symposiums on topics such as promoting barrier free environments and incorporating the concerns of women with disabilities in decision-making, the summit ended on a very positive note.

`` The summit provided an excellent opportunity for 10 women with disabilities to participate in a mainstream gender initiative and demonstrate their newly learned advocacy skills," Takamine said.

`` The issues on women with disabilities were fully incorporated into the summit deliberations and reflected in the Phitsanulok Declaration on the Advancement of Women in Local Government adopted by the summit.

`` The lesson the group learned is that although small in number, when each member is well-prepared and willing to support each other, they can make a sizeable contribution to the agenda of a larger group. They have gained a lot of confidence from this experience and will share it with other women with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region."

A few days after the Phitsanulok summit ended, another development was to bring smiles to those very same faces and by extension, to the faces of an estimated five to six million Thai people with disabilities. Thailand, represented by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, was awarded the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability prize for 2001.

Roosevelt contracted polio at the age of 39 and was unable to walk or stand without assistance but was nevertheless elected US President four times. The award, with its bronze bust of Roosevelt, was in recognition of Thailand's `` noteworthy progress towards the goal of full participation of citizens with disabilities".

`` Thailand truly deserves the FDR International Disability Award. The country has strengthened its national capacity to improve the lives of persons with disabilities through promoting their rights for development," Takamine said.

``Thailand has also assisted other countries in the region by collaborating with Escap in many regional activities in support of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons."`