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If the road to gender equality is ``long and filled with many obstacles" as averred by Escap executive secretary Kim Hak-Su, some important milestones are undoubtedly being overcome.

About 200 delegates from 24 countries and territories in the Asia-Pacific region are here until Friday to address issues faced by women in local government.

Presented as the first-ever Asia-Pacific summit of women mayors and councillors, the four-day seminar is intended to increase awareness of the role women can play in local government, while highlighting the challenges and constraints they face.

The objective of the summit, described as more practical and focused than the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, is also to discuss follow-up strategies and actions to promote women's participation and representation.

``The summit is particularly relevant and timely to Asia and the Pacific," said Kim Hak-Su, of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

``This is because it highlights three major issues of the region: urbanisation and problems of cities, the status of women and their role in decision-making, as well as the importance of decentralisation and strengthening of local government institutions."

It was precisely at this local level that women were encouraged to take a greater role, local government being a good training ground and easily accessible in terms of election costs.

The Phitsanulok city mayor, Premrudee Champunot, is the longest serving woman mayor in Thailand.

Along with six other women mayors, councillors and an executive deputy mayor from the Asia-Pacific region, Ms Premrudee will be granted an award of recognition for outstanding service.

``Phitsanulok is a historic province that has been at the forefront of the struggle for independence in Thailand," said provincial governor Vicharn Jayanandana.

``And with that same spirit we are striving to achieve gender equality.

``With mayor Premrudee, we are committed to achieving gender equality in local government," said the governor of Phitsanulok.