BILA ON WOMEN I
Final Statement

The first FABC gathering focusing on Women’s Concern during this UN Decade on Women was co-organized by FABC-OL and SEAMS and with the collaboration of FABC-OE and FABC-OEIA. This was also a response to the request of bishops during the FABC 6th Plenary Assembly (Jan. 1995) to hold an Asian wide meeting. We copy the full text of the final statement.

FINAL STATEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Bishops of Asia are listening.

1.2 All over their continent, they can hear “the cries and the pain of the women,” (FABC 6, Workshop on Women report) – women struggling to survive beneath the weight of poverty; women falling victim to physical, psychological and sexual violence; women deprived of opportunities for advancement in social and political life; women whose contribution to Church and society is unrecognized; women oppressed in the name of religion; women without a voice.

1.3 And the Bishops are touched.

1.4 At the IV Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, 1986, (FABC 4 #3.3.5), again at the “Consultation on Women,” in 1993, and finally at the VI Plenary Assembly on “Christian Discipleship in Asia,” Manila, January, 1995, (FABC 6, Workshop on Women), the Bishops and the Churches of Asia realized that they could not turn a deaf ear to the sufferings of women. Thus was BILA on Women given birth.

1.5 Encouraged by Pope John Paul II’s celebration of the “feminine genius” (P. John Paul II’s Letter to Women, June 1995), and filled with the hopes of the Beijing Conference and NGO Forum on Women in September 1995, 61 participants, including 9 bishops from 17 countries, came together between November 13-19, 1995, in Thailand to examine the “Role of Women in the Church and Society Towards the Third Millennium.” Open to the Spirit, these women and men sought:
1. To grow in greater awareness of the situation of women and the injustice done to them;
2. To learn some of the approaches used to reach out to women by Church groups, NGO’s and groups of other religious beliefs;
3. To share and discover what more can be done:
   - by our Church groups;
   - to have joint efforts with other groups who work for women and in partnership with men;
   - to bring about change in attitude with regards to women and their participation in Church and society.
1.6 The meeting itself was unique. At the earlier FABC Consultations, the concerns of women formed only a part of wider issues. This time, women and men were seen co-evangelists, and women in particular, were recognized as active agents in their own transformation.

2. **PROCESS**

2.1 We began from the lived experience. We entered into the anguish of women sex workers, we witnessed the exploitation of women labourers, we share the brokenness of women in distress, we celebrated the courage of women who dared to respond to the pains of their sisters and we grew in admiration for our Buddhist sisters. It was a profound experience that not only awakened us to the awareness of women’s reality, but laid the foundation for the solidarity that we were to forge as we discovered the commonalities in our situations, and the need to move beyond our narrow local concerns.

2.2 In the midst of the miserable conditions of women in different countries, we also saw the emerging leadership of committed women at the grassroots level, we observed with hope the many contributions of women in the Church and in society to creatively improve the situation. Many women are coming forward to undergo training so that they are better equipped for the mission of transformation of the world.

2.3 Our worship formed and integral part of our theologizing. The daily Eucharist celebrated the feminine and reflected our understanding of God and worship. All of us prayed together in our own cultures, making present the God of all nations.

2.4 Resource persons shared their experience and expertise, stimulating the participants to enter with their own process of reflection and analysis. The group discussions that followed helped us to move from the historical and the theological levels to the level of spirituality or transformation. The sessions were enlivened by role plays and audio-visual presentations and the cultural exchange every evening brought us together in song, dance and drama, strengthening our spirit of friendship and solidarity.

3. **INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

3.1 The reality of poverty in many Asian countries affects the life of the poor, the indigenous people and women. The whole thrust of development based on economic growth and profit favours those who have power and wealth. This leads to the exclusion of those who are less privileged. They have no voice in the economic-political decisions affecting the country, and women, often the poorest of the poor, are affected the most.

3.2 Capitalistic economic development also cultivates the primacy of scientific rationality at the expense of human dignity and ecology. It brings with it a consumeristic and materialistic lifestyle creating a crisis of values in our societies.

3.3 Patriarchy in society and its reflections in the major religions of Asia, keeps the status quo of women’s subordinate position.

3.4 These death dealing factors drive the poor to sell their girls/women into the sex industry, which has turned parts of Asia into a brothel for the capitalist world. This has promoted trafficking of women in and between countries. In this situation, the transmission of HIV/AIDS has reached epidemic proportions. In this context, the development of the
pandemic demands a re-examination of the formation of our personnel in pastoral approaches and in the areas of human relationship and spirituality. This sexual exploitation has commodified women, lowering them to the status of NO-BODY (non-persons) in Church and Society.

3.5 Women are also driven to leave their homes and migrate to urban areas or overseas to take up jobs under exploitative working conditions.

3.6 With half of humanity dehumanized in this way, we become deeply impoverished. We have lost out on the contribution of these women – their affective, beautiful, harmonizing, peaceful, and creative capacities.

3.7 This is evident even in the Catholic Church. Catholic morality and spirituality are also biased against women. Traditional Marian spirituality promotes the docility of women. Scripture is interpreted to reinforce the stereotyping of women as temptress and property of men.

3.8 In this gathering of women and clergy, we discovered that it is through the listening of women’s stories of pains and hurts, joys and struggles, that the power of bonding comes into being. This creates a new hope for partnership between women and men in mission through:
   - a discovery of deeply positive elements in local cultures that relate more closely to nature and all that enhances life;
   - the inspiration of the simple lifestyle of Buddhist nuns as a counter culture against consumerism and materialism;
   - women’s contribution to theology and theological reflections;
   - the reflection on Scripture from women’s perspective;
   - affirming the affective dimension as dimension as an integral part of personhood where knowing our bodies and our feelings, without ignoring the development of our intellect, leads of full knowledge;
   - living out the option of Jesus for women and the poor.

4. RESOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 In his “Letter to Women” of 29 June 1995, Pope John Paul II, asked pardon, in the name of the Church for the wrongs and insensitivities that had been perpetuated against women in the Church. “If objective blame,” said the Pope, “especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this, I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment to fidelity to the Gospel vision.” In the same vein, the participants of BILA on Women acknowledged that also in Asia, women have suffered and continued to suffer indignities, exclusion, and both subtle and overt forms of exploitation in the Church and in the wider society. This awareness does not cause us to lose hope, but rather offers us an occasion to commit ourselves anew to work and eradicate the injustices and to improve gender relationships.

4.2 As Christians, we are called to build a community of sisters and brothers who live as faithful disciples of Jesus and bear witness to His message for our world. Therefore, in our resolutions and recommendations, we seek to become, by working together in mutual respect and through sharing gifts of God’s reign in today’s Asia.

4.3 We resolve:
   1. To commit ourselves to uphold the dignity of women as equal partners;
2. To face the injustice in the Church and society that discriminate against women, the poor, the marginalized and the indigenous peoples;
3. To denounce cultural practices that violate the human dignity of women, such as female foeticide and infanticide, genital mutilation, child labour, dowry practice, prostitution, trafficking of women and children and sex tourism;
4. To fight, joining other groups – NGO’s and those of other Religions – against all forms of violence, sexual harassment and molestation, rape, murders . . .

4.4 We recommend:
1. That there be, to begin with, at least 30% participation of women in all Church organizations and councils;
2. That at the diocesan level, a committee be formed to address injustice especially against women and children and take immediate action;
3. That in the Church, women, including the Religious Sisters, be justly compensated for their work;
4. That women’s theology be introduced in seminaries and formation centres;
5. That women be given support and opportunities, which will enable them to study theology, like: scholarships, childcare facilities for students with children, part-time courses with schedule suitable to women and in convenient locations.

5. CONCLUSION
5.1 From FABC Tokyo, 1986, to Pattaya, 1995, and aspiration realized!
5.2 Our genuine desire expressed at the Tokyo FABC Plenary Assembly of 1986 to make the Church a visible sign of the Reign of God’s love, has thus begun to take shape.
5.3 Having seen and heard the harsh and cruel realities concerning women in a society geared to power exploitation and consumerism, we are moved by the Spirit to action on behalf of women.
5.4 Our efforts will be directed to the empowerment of women in our theological thinking and the reading of God’s Word in the present context, as well as the implementation of the specific resolutions and recommendations of the participants of this meeting.
5.5 Our message to the Church in Asia will be as a voice crying out in the wilderness of women’s oppression to straighten the paths towards the fullness of life for them and the future generations of the third millennium.
5.6 Asia’s deep religiosity and richness of culture should help us to reclaim and uphold the dignity of women, and with the partnership of women and men, build a rainbow heralding peace and harmony, solidarity and unity among the People of God.