Making a difference in the realities of Women in Asia.

Introduction
Thirty-six participants from twelve countries representing women’s concerns and women’s commissions gathered in the Camillian Pastoral Care Centre in Latkrabang, Bangkok, Thailand for three days. Our meeting carried additional significance as the FABC is celebrating 40 years of its existence this year and FABC Office of Laity and Family, Women’s Desk is also looking at how it has progressed these past years in the area of women’s concerns. We were aware that we are in a time of preparation as we enter a ‘Year of Faith’ in the universal church. This is indeed the time to examine our roots in faith, the source of our strength and mission and to return to the Gospel in new and life-giving ways.

Three Bishops, one clergyman, eight women religious and twenty-four lay women from Bangladesh, India, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand, accompanied by observers from Vietnam and Australia demonstrated a deep common bond in their commitment to women and their situations.

We reflected on the word of God telling us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The word of God also assured us that we are chosen and sent in our work with women to bring Good News to those who are on the margins.

Realities
- Over the years we have seen improvements in the situation of women in society and church.
- Today many more people are aware of the situations of violence against women, the negative impact of migration on women and families, human trafficking especially of girls and many other issues.
- There are many groups of people who are willing to help and organize themselves to work for women in need.
- More groups today have the capacity to give pastoral care and Spiritual accompaniment.
- More and more governments are enacting policies and laws to protect the rights of women and to bring greater equality between men and women.

However, we had to admit that many problems remain hardly diminished.

We listened carefully with our hearts to what is going on with women in the different countries of Asia through the country reports.
- Violence against women has no barriers. Abused and battered women are found in every culture and class. Women do not speak out due to fear and shame.
- Women’s dual role in the home and in the workplace places too heavy a load on them which creates tensions within marriage and family.
Today many societies prefer sons to daughters. It is a grave issue with very dangerous consequences. Preferential treatment of sons means that they receive more education, health care, food and opportunities.

- Women have been caught up in war and have been used as weapons in war and have been raped and tortured. War widows find little no support or compensation. These women are the poorest of the poor.
- The phenomenon of international and internal migration has created many vulnerable groups. Women in particular are exploited as cheap labour in free trade zones, in factories and as domestic workers.
- Millions of women are pushed due to poverty and other reasons to migrate for work. They are separated from home, family and culture and are often mistreated and underpaid.
- The problem of trafficking in women and girls for commercial, sexual exploitation is growing at an alarming rate. The need for better data, networking and enforcement of regulations are badly needed to address this modern slavery.
- Playing a part in politics, public life and in our local Churches was seen as an uphill task for women who remain a minority in government top positions; in Church Pastoral Councils and in any meaningful decision making process in many countries and in the church.

Our Response
The Catholic Church has been at the fore front of many social issues, protecting the stranger and the orphan; being a voice for the voiceless. Today, we need to learn how to work with various groups to build on our strengths and on our beliefs. We need to join hands with civil society groups as we have much to contribute from our wisdom; moral and ethical storehouse and in particular the values enshrined in the social teachings of the church.

We also have much to learn from civil society groups in the way of building partnerships, doing research and advocating for the cause of women.

We need to respond in some of the following ways:

1. Form and strengthen support groups of women locally for women migrants; foreign domestic workers; abused women, single mothers and widowed or divorced women.

2. Educate boys and girls towards equality and mutual respect.

3. Set up research, publishing and advocacy services to work to eliminate discrimination against women and evolve approaches that are proactive and responsive.

4. Work with Small Christian Communities in parishes, and other social and inter-religious organizations and movements to find ways to reach out to women.

5. Women being better connected to each other in order to work on common problems with greater efficacy and reach out to other women who find themselves isolated in their difficulties.

6. Groups working for women to network for better planning and action against human trafficking and forced migration.
Our Hope
We sincerely hope that we can work together with many partners, working with the same problems concerning women, both in church and in society. We need to have courage and good discernment in working with various groups who may not share all the same values.

We pray that our strong faith in the dignity of the human person will encourage us to serve women whose dignity is violated regularly and without any support. We would like to focus on all the ways in which dignity is violated, including the way poverty pushes women into trades and migration that are detrimental to them and to their families.

Recommendations:
Guided by the Holy Spirit we appeal to our people to become more aware and to act so that we can make a difference in the realities of women:

We recommend the following:
1. That education of women and men be aimed at building equality.
2. Education of the young is particularly important for this purpose.
3. Form support groups wherever possible to empower women specially those who are victims of abuse, violence, or are in difficult situations.
4. Help parents understand the value of both girls and boys and give parenting education to raise awareness of the need for equality in raising children.
5. To educate Seminarians so that in future priests will be more aware of discrimination against women will be more open to the participation of women in society and in the church.
6. To develop in every local church, policy for better participation of women and a policy to deal with sexual abuse.
7. To network with greater effectiveness for the purpose of sharing information and best practices to support women.
8. To cooperate with state and NGO agencies that share common interests and values in order to raise a stronger collective voice.
9. To collaborate more effectively with the Government, NGOs and international institutions in addressing the moral, social and economic needs of women

Conclusion
We appeal to all women and men in Church to look around more carefully to become more aware of the discrimination that is present all around.

We pray through Mary our Mother to show us the way to work with the power of the Holy Spirit. We take Mary who clung to her faith as she stood at the foot of the cross as our Model and Mentor and continue with confidence and hope. We take inspiration from the great women in our church through the ages and we do not allow the enormity of our difficulties to overwhelm us.

12th July 2012