

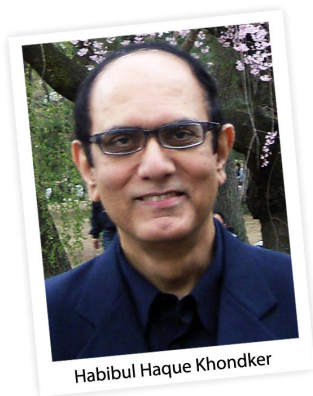
GENDER PERSPECTIVES

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IN THIS ISSUE

- 01 Socio-Economic Development and Gender Empowerment in the ASEAN Region
By Prof. Habibul Haque Khondker
- 04 Upcoming Events, Seminars and Conferences - Local & Regional

FEATURE ARTICLE



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SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN THE ASEAN REGION

By Professor Habibul Haque Khondker

Since the late 1960s and 1970s in the wake of the second wave of feminism that swept across the Western countries, gender issues began to enter the national development agenda in most Asian countries. It has to be highlighted that the globalization of the women's movement was also instrumental in sparking changes in how countries in Asia began to look at women's concerns. Increasingly from the 1970s onwards, the subject of gender equality became gradually incorporated into the development discourse. International organizations, national governments, non-governmental organizations and research institutions in the region began to direct their attention to issues of gender equality, at least, in the sense of providing equitable, if not equal, opportunities to women. It was revealed that even in poverty-stricken countries, poverty was not an equal opportunity hazard; women and children were over-represented in the impoverished groups. The growing concern with gender equity led to the United Nations designating 1975 as International Women's Year which culminated in the first World Conference of women in Mexico City in 1975 and 1976–1985 being declared as the decade for women by the United Nations. Since then, women's development has become a near-universal yardstick for measuring the quality of socio-economic develop-

ment. In the wake of the civil rights movement, women's rights as human rights was not just a battle cry of the feminists but of every progressive person. It was in that context, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Public policies appropriate for the improvement of the conditions of women and the resultant empowerment of women have gained increasing salience. It is not just the conservative segments in various cultures that were impeding the advancement of women's rights but also the neo-liberal revolution which started with the rise of the Reagan-Thatcher Era of the 1980s was implicit in rolling back the gains of women made in the 1970s. The rise of NGOs and the civil society activism can be seen as a reaction to the declining role of the state under the pressure of neo-liberal ideology. In 1995, the UN 4th World Conference on Women took place in Beijing which provided a platform to assess the gains and losses in the struggle for women's achievements over the past two decades. The Beijing conference also brought the NGOs involved in the women's development to the fore. Subsequently in the beginning of the new millennium, the improvement in the conditions of women is seen in the context of the public-private cooperation. Of the eight Millennium development goals (MDGs) enunciated by the United Nations, goal number 3—promote gender equality—directly relates to the improvement of women's status. Two other goals—reduction of child mortality (number 4) and improvement of maternal health (number 5)—indirectly relate to women's development. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) has introduced the measurement of women's status through the

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ment.

The creation of UNIFEM in 1976 by the UN General Assembly to help improve the conditions of women in the developing countries was a reflection of the growing concern over issues of gender and deve-

Table 1: Status of Gender-Related Development in ASEAN

HDI Rank	Country	Gender related Development Index (Rank)	Value	Female Life Expectancy	Male Life Expectancy	Estimated Female Income	Estimated Male Income
23	Singapore	*	*	82.6	77.8	34,554	64,656
30	Brunei	29	0.906	79.6	74.9	36,838	62,631
66	Malaysia	58	0.823	76.6	71.9	7,972	18,886
87	Thailand	72	0.782	72.1	69.9	6,341	10,018
105	Philippines	86	0.748	73.9	69.4	2,506	4,293
111	Indonesia	93	0.726	72.5	68.5	2,263	5,163
116	Vietnam	94	0.723	76.1	72.3	2,131	3,069
133	Lao PDR	112	0.614	65.9	63.2	1,877	2,455
137	Cambodia	116	0.588	62.3	58.6	1,465	2,158
138	Myanmar	*	*	63.4	59.0	640	1043

Source: Calculated from Table J: Gender-related Development Index and its components, Human Development Report 2009, UNDP; * data not included in the original Report.

Gender-Related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure. The idea of sustainable development which emerged in the context of the first wave of the neoliberal revolution also takes into account the issue of gender equity.

In the context of Southeast Asia, growth patterns and the empowerment of women over the years have been uneven. Some countries in the ASEAN region, especially the developed ones, have attained considerable socio-economic development as measured in terms of their national income but have not achieved sustained progress in gender empowerment.

UNDP employs a four-tiered scheme to classify 182 countries of the world in assessing their progress in human development: very high human development (38 countries), high human development (45 countries), medium human development (75 countries) and low human development (24 countries). Following the UNDP classification of the 10 ASEAN countries, two (Singapore and Brunei) belong to the very high human development country category, one (Malaysia) belongs to the high human development category, while the rest (Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, People's Republic of Laos and Myanmar) belong to the medium human development category. The difference in the status of women and the resultant gender gap needs to be examined in the context of differences in human development outcome in these countries.

Singapore's relatively high gender empowerment index is a result of government policies favourable to women's participation in Parliament as well as affording opportuni-

ties for quality education across the board which has enabled more women to find employment as professionals. The latter process is aided by market forces as well. Moreover, the income gap in the island state remains higher than that of Thailand or the Philippines.

Within ASEAN, countries such as the Philippines and Thailand have done much better in bridging the gender gap compared to Singapore and Malaysia, as shown in Table 3. Countries with a very high human development outcome may lag in bridging the gender gap. The Philippines with a much lower overall human development profile has done remarkably well in bridging the gender gap and has been placed within the top 10 countries in the world, ahead of the United States (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2009).

One explanation of the seemingly uneven gender development scene in the ASEAN can be understood in the phrase: "disadvantage of advantage", suggesting that countries that are ahead in terms of gender development indicators may not necessarily enjoy the rate of progress as countries at a much higher level of development. The low rank of Cambodia in terms of both Human Development Index as well as the gender gap may lead to the conclusion that broad-based and sustained socio-economic growth would empower women. Moreover, the observation that countries where the movement for democratization is stronger are also ahead in closing the gender gap and empowering women is worth serious examination. In the Philippines, alongside a contentious democracy, there is a strong culture of gender-related civil soci-

ety activism which may also account for women's gains.

Invariably women's advancement is closely tied to economic indicators. While there has been steady economic growth in the region of which women have enjoyed some benefits, the economies of this region have also been disrupted by the crisis years of 1997-98 and 2008-9. The impact of the economic crisis of 2008-9 on the women in this region has compromised some of the gains they have achieved, especially for the poorer women. Women involved in low-end service sectors such as domestic services to tourism-related occupations have been hardest hit. The loss of employment and income for many women in countries such as Cambodia has exposed them to hazards such as human trafficking. Besides the growth of the sex trade has intensified women's vulnerability.

[G]rowth patterns and the empowerment of women over the years have been uneven...

In the path to economic recovery, there is no doubt that the governments of the ASEAN countries need to continue to balance broad-based economic policies with gender-sensitive policies to further close the gender gap. These policies need to be coupled with an increased gender-focus in development initiatives and opportunities for sustainable socio-economic prosperity in the region.

Continued on pg 3...

Table 2: Gender Empowerment Measure in selected ASEAN Countries

HDI Rank	Country	Gender empowerment Measure Index (Rank)	GEM Value	Seats in Parliament held by women, %	Female professional and technical workers, %	Women in Ministerial positions, %	Ratio of Estimated Female to Male Earned Income
23	Singapore	16	0.786	24	45	0	0.53
30	Brunei	--	--	--	37	7	0.59
66	Malaysia	68	0.542	15	41	9	0.42
87	Thailand	76	0.514	13	53	7	0.63
105	Philippines	59	0.560	20	63	9	0.58
111	Indonesia	96	0.408	12	48	11	0.44
116	Vietnam	62	0.554	26	51	4	0.69
133	Lao PDR	--	--	25	--	11	0.76
137	Cambodia	91	0.427	16	41	7	0.68
138	Myanmar	--	--	--	--	0	0.61

Source: Calculated from Table K: Gender Empowerment Measure Index and its components, Human Development Report 2009, UNDP (data not included in the original Report).

Table 3: Gender Gap Index in ASEAN 2009

Country	2009 Rank	Overall Score	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Philippines	9	0.7579	0.7604	1.0000	0.9796	0.2915
Thailand	59	0.6907	0.7216	0.9933	0.9796	0.0685
Vietnam	71	0.6802	0.7349	0.8974	0.9700	0.1184
Singapore	85	0.6664	0.6707	0.9370	0.9575	0.1005
Indonesia	93	0.6580	0.5722	0.9656	0.9719	0.1224
Brunei	95	0.6524	0.6239	0.9923	0.9659	0.0275
Malaysia	101	0.6467	0.5653	0.9891	0.9695	0.0631
Cambodia	104	0.6410	0.6488	0.8568	0.9796	0.0786

Source: Table 3a: The Global Gender Gap Index 2009 Index and Table 3c: Detailed rankings 2009, The Global Gender Gap Report by Ricardo Hausmann, Laura Tyson and Saaida Zahidi, World Economic Forum, 2009 <<http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf>>, accessed 15 November 2009.

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3. ESCAP, <<http://www.unescap.org/55/e1133e.htm>>, accessed 15 November, 2009.

UPCOMING EVENTS, SEMINARS & CONFERENCES - LOCAL & REGIONAL

- ◆ **“Empowering Women: The Economic Imperative”**
Women’s Education Worldwide 2010 Conference
6 – 8 January 2010
By the Women’s College
The University of Sydney
- ◆ **Contextualising Geographical Approaches to Studying Gender in Asia**
3-5 March 2010
University of Delhi
By the Department of Geography, University of Delhi and the College of Asia and The Pacific, Australia National University with support from the International Geographical Union (IGU)
- ◆ **Doing Gender in Online Dating: A Comparison of Cyber Profiles from Singapore by Local and Expatriate Men and Women**
15 January 2010
Speaker: Dr Nilanjan Raghunath
4.00 pm - 5.30 pm
Seminar Room 3
By Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)
- ◆ **“East Meets West: The Intimate Side of Sexual Health”**
6th International Conference on Sexual and Reproductive Health
29 -31 March 2010
Pattaya, Thailand
By Siam Care Foundation

CONTACT US

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