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GENDER TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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GENDER TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Women Now, Women in the Future

EDITED BY

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FOREWORD

“Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future” was a symposium held on 4 December 2008 in conjunction with the Gender Studies Programme of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Established in 2005, the Programme seeks to explore how gender inequality plays out in the Southeast Asian region. More specifically, the Programme examines two broad areas: (a) wo(men) and politics, and (b) the health and social concerns of vulnerable women including sex workers, trafficked women, internally displaced women, low-skilled migrant women workers, and poor women independently heading households. The objective of the Programme is to emphasize two points: (a) that gender is a field worthy of rigorous study because a gender perspective is critical to give voice to women, and (b) that ISEAS undertakes research in several emerging concerns related to women in the region.

Why the focus on women’s issues is a justifiable question. Since women make up half of the world’s population, research and analysis on women is critical in understanding one of many forms of social stratification. Undoubtedly women face unique disadvantages and, in turn, social problems because of their gender identity. Hence in some contexts, it becomes important to formulate policies informed by critical debate to ensure that women are not left behind and that they share in the fruits of development equally with men. For these reasons and many others, the trends and changes in women’s lives and the obstacles women face in advancement and securing their own rights are worthy of research, documentation and analysis.

The recent symposium provided a platform for discussion of various issues related to women in contemporary Southeast Asia. Since the symposium was the first in the series on “Gender Trends in Southeast Asia”, the speakers’ presentations covered a broad range of topics: (a) women and family; (b) women and employment; (c) women and politics; (d) women and health; and (e) women and religion.

This volume is a compilation of the papers presented at the symposium. There are three aims in putting together this publication. First, it provides a written documentation of some current concerns of Southeast Asian women. Second, the publication serves to aid policy-makers, academics and NGOs working on gender issues in the region to recognize the disadvantages and problems faced by Southeast Asian women. Third, this volume will enable policy-makers, academics and women's NGOs to track periodically the changes and continuities experienced by women in this region.

The Institute under its Gender Studies Programme, coordinated by Dr Theresa W. Devasahayam, strives to increase understanding of how gender inequality is expressed and perpetuated in different domains. The symposium held this year focused on a range of issues related to women in Southeast Asia. It is hoped that with each symposium, our understanding of these issues will increase.

Ambassador K. Kesavapany
Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Singapore
15 January 2009

MESSAGE

**MRS YU-FOO YEE SHOON,
MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
YOUTH AND SPORTS**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you on a subject that has always been of special interest to me. I find each day of my work fulfilling as I am directly involved in advancing the interests of women in Singapore and things that women traditionally care a lot about, like family, children, marriage, parenting and even what women want men to do more of!

Politics

It is important to empower women to participate in decision-making at the community and national levels. The Singapore Government welcomes women to leadership positions based on meritocracy. In the domain of politics, for example, female representation in the Singapore Parliament has been increasing. Women make up 24.5 per cent of the Singapore Parliament today. This percentage exceeds the Inter-Parliamentary Union's world average of 18.3 per cent.¹

The number of women holding public office has increased, especially in local government, at the higher levels of political participation. For example, women in Lao PDR, Timor-Leste and Vietnam have prided themselves in holding more than 25 per cent of national parliamentary seats in 2007. Other Southeast Asian countries have between eight and 16 per cent of seats held by women in national parliament.²

Employment

As gender equality is the goal adopted by the international community and national governments, people's rights, responsibilities, social status and access to resources should not depend on their gender. This includes employment opportunities for women as well as men.

According to the internationally agreed commitments under the International Labour Organization (or ILO), some key international labour conventions for gender equality include: discrimination in employment, equal remuneration, workers with family responsibilities and maternity protection. The ILO reports that in 2006, the female labour force participation rate (or LFPR) is lower than males in all the countries covered. Vietnam and Thailand has the highest LFPR at 72 and 66 per cent respectively. In comparison, the rate for other Southeast Asian countries are below or around 50 per cent.

In Singapore, the LFPR was 78 per cent for males and 54 per cent for females in 2007. Although top positions in the public and private sectors used to be traditionally male-dominated, it is no longer the case. In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of many Singapore women to these very positions, attesting to the rise of women's influence in the nation. 47 per cent of Singaporean women were in the professional, managerial or technical positions in 2007, compared to 50 per cent for men. I am pleased to see that the proportion of female employers have increased from 20.1 per cent in 2003 to 23.1 per cent in 2007.

In Singapore, the Government is committed to equal remuneration and treatment for work of equal value. We ratified a key ILO Convention on equal remuneration in 2002. The median monthly income for full-time employed females in Singapore last year was 87 per cent that of males. It was 81.3 per cent a decade ago.³ Apart from Singapore, seven other Southeast Asian countries have ratified that Convention,⁴ with the exclusion of Brunei, Myanmar and Timor-Leste.

Fertility Concerns

In recent years, there are women in Southeast Asia who have made great strides especially in the more developed economies in the region. Especially among the growing number of educated women, careers have taken priority and this has led to smaller family sizes and, consequently, a falling fertility rate — a pressing concern for some governments, including Singapore. According to the World Fertility Patterns 2007, the world's fertility rate is 2.6. Of the

11 Southeast Asian countries, Singapore has the lowest total fertility rate at 1.3, followed by Vietnam at 1.9. The highest are Timor-Leste and Laos with a fertility rate of 4.7 and 4.6 respectively.⁵

Health

In the area of health, women suffer greater vulnerabilities than men. Women much earlier on in life face reproductive health problems. The battle against breast cancer is increasing following the trends in many developed countries. Every year, some 1,300 women in Singapore are diagnosed with breast cancer, adding to the increasing pool of women diagnosed with breast cancer here. Breast cancer rates have increased by about 25 per cent in the last ten years⁶ in Singapore.

In the less developed Southeast Asian countries, maternal mortality continues to record staggering high numbers because of poor access to good pre-natal and post-natal gynecological healthcare. For example in Timor-Leste, it is estimated that the maternal mortality rate is up to 660 for every 100,000 live births. We are fortunate that the rate is six in 100,000 in Singapore.⁷

Education

Education represents the most sustainable solution to level the playing field between different groups in society. In fact, one of the eight Millennium Development Goals committed by the United Nations is to achieve universal primary education by 2015. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (or Unicef) report in 2007, 115 million children of primary school age do not attend school, and 53 per cent are girls.

The world literacy rates for youths (or those aged between 15 to 24) from 2000 to 2006 for males and females are 91 and 85 per cent respectively. In general, the youth literacy rates for both genders in Southeast Asian countries are comparable and higher than the world average, with the exception of Cambodia and Lao PDR.⁸ In Singapore, both girls and boys have equal access to quality education from young, and the youth literacy rate is 99 per cent for both genders.

Though women in some Southeast Asian countries may have lower literacy rates than men, I note that a "new gender gap" has emerged in the newly developing countries in the region. For instance, in Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and also Singapore, enrollment at the tertiary education institutions among females has been higher than males. The higher proportion

of females in higher education has been said to have led to the flourishing of a range of non-governmental organizations focused on women's issues since the 1980s that have advocated women's equality in various arenas.

Conclusion

The symposium "Gender Trends in Southeast Asia" organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies will inform us further on the current trends related to women in this region — the progress they have made in the different spheres and the obstacles they continue to face in achieving equal status to men.

Women's empowerment and advancement in all spheres of life are crucial for the progress of society. To enable women to harmonize their multiple obligations to work and family, women need a total supportive approach encompassing policies, services and mindset change of the individual, family, employers, and the community.

The fact that all Southeast Asian countries have signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women demonstrates the commitment of governments in the region to advance and promote gender equality.

With increasing emphasis on enhancing the status and progress of women on each national government's agenda, I have every confidence that women in Southeast Asia can look towards a more promising future.

With that, I wish all of you a fruitful symposium. Thank you.

Notes

1. Source <<http://www.ipu.org>>.
2. Source <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Key_Indicators/2008/pdf/Goal-03.pdf>.
3. Source: Ministry of Manpower.
4. Source <<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/newratframeE.htm>>.
5. Source <<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldfertility2007/worldfertility2007.htm>>.
6. Source: Ministry of Health.
7. Source: UNICEF. The reported maternal mortality rate from 2000 to 2006 is 6.
8. Cambodia: 88 and 79 per cent for males and females respectively; Lao PDR: 83 and 75 per cent respectively.

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This book is a compilation of the papers presented at the one-day symposium “Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future” organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies on 4 December 2008. The symposium is an activity of the Gender Studies Programme at the Institute.

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