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GROWING OLD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GENDER?

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INTRODUCTION

The world has undergone significant demographic shifts since the second half of the twentieth century. Fertility rates have declined significantly — principally because women have gained greater educational levels — and for many of these women, marriage no longer promises the benefits it once did to earlier generations (Bongaarts 1999; Castles 2003; Jones 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009*b*; Kim 2005). For this reason, marriages are occurring at a later age as young women have found more reasons to resist or at least postpone this rite of passage (Jones 2003, 2004, 2009*a*). Another staggering demographic shift has been demonstrated by the ageing of populations with a doubling in average life expectancy compared with figures from the last century (Kinsella 2009). While these demographic trends have enormous repercussions on the economies of countries, older persons, in particular, have been labelled as a “burden” by governments since they are seen to place hefty demands on healthcare and social security systems and, in turn, to exert higher pressures on the productive population (Mujahid 2006; Mehta 1997*a*). Apart from the economic implications of

this trend, the impact of population ageing on national security and the sustainability of families has also been flagged as critical concerns deserving of attention (Jackson and Howe 2008; Kinsella 2009).

One thing for certain is that the perception of older women and men has not been the same in the discourse on ageing populations. The social construction of ageing is distinctly gendered in that men and women have been found to experience life differently in their older age in part because of their gender. First, women have an obvious “demographic advantage” in that they live longer than men. This phenomenon which continues across the life course into old age has led to the coining of the phrase ‘feminization of ageing’ which suggests that there are greater proportions of older women than men (Kinsella 2009; Gist and Velkoff 1997). Whether experiencing a longer life expectancy is necessarily an advantage to women, however, is far more nuanced since larger proportions of them compared with older men tend to live greater number of years in disability. Owing to their shorter healthy life expectancy and higher survival rates compared with men, this demographic trend in fact serves to reinforce the statement: “women get sick; men die”. In this case, this demographic advantage of older women may instead be regarded as a “disadvantage” because their need for formal and informal care increases (Henrard 1996) at an older age, and it is at this time that their health condition becomes burdensome to them (and not to mention the state), especially if healthcare costs are beyond the reach of the individual. However, with greater emancipation as women gain an education and become engaged in wage work, especially as countries become more developed, increasing numbers of women have been able to demand for and afford better healthcare, and in some cases putting themselves on equal par with men, and thereby decreasing the number of years they would spend in disability (Barford, Dorling and Smith 2006).

Second, men and women tend to experience ageing differently in the area of caring. In this regard, older women become caregivers to their husbands while the reverse occurs less often. In the United States, Arber and Ginn (1993) have found that disabled older men on average receive about two-thirds of their personal and domestic care from their own wives while women in a similar situation receive a little more than a quarter of their personal care from their husbands. This is to be expected for two key reasons. First, women tend to marry men who are older than themselves and as their husbands grow older, women invariably take on the role of elder caregivers. Second, this trend of women being primary caregivers of their husbands in old age shows

up because of cultural norms. In fact, cultural norms demand women to be the primary caregivers throughout their life course, while men are ascribed the role of breadwinners in the family. In this case, caregiving is bound up with the feminine identity regarded to be at the centre of women's experience of "self". Hence, it is of no surprise that in a study in the United States, it was found that the typical caregiver was a woman providing more than 20 hours of care a week towards an ageing relative (Schumacher, Beck and Marren 2006), and should the role become more intense, it is always the woman who becomes the primary caregiver (OECD 2011). While caregiving may be regarded as a rewarding experience, it may also have a profound negative effect on the woman who becomes the caregiver, potentially affecting her mental health (OECD 2011).

Third, larger proportions of older women are more likely to be "dependent on others" — whether it be spouses, families or the state — more than older men since they would not have worked or would have had interrupted careers as a result of having to provide care towards their families. In this case, being dependent on others has been interpreted as a disadvantage and, in turn, construed as a vulnerability since it signals the lack of savings and the inability to be self-sufficient. Moreover, as a result of not having been engaged in formal employment because of having to provide care towards their own families as well as receiving lower wages compared with men, older women are more likely than older men to slip into poverty or near poverty (Arber and Ginn 1991; Barusch 1994) — a problem that is exacerbated among unmarried as well as divorced women (Gist and Velkoff 1997; Yin 2008). That older women are financially worse off than older men was also found to be the case in Sweden in spite of its well-developed social welfare system. Here, older women were found to be struggling in meeting their basic needs since the country's social security system privileges those who have had stable, long-term labour force engagement, which automatically disadvantages women since many would have spent either fewer years in the labour force compared with men or, for that matter, may not have worked at all because of their caregiving duties (Gummarsson 2002).

Fourth, because there are many more married women who outlive their husbands and survive into old age, the numbers of older women who are more likely to be widowed supersedes that of men (Gist and Velkoff 1997). Nevertheless, among women and men who have survived thus far, their experience of widowhood differs to a significant degree. Widowhood, in fact, has been construed to work to the advantage of women more than men. Among older women, there has been research showing how

old age has actually brought on a new sense of autonomy and freedom. Among those who may have been playing the reproductive role during their marriage, many may continue this role into old age as they end up providing care for their own grandchildren after the demise of their husbands (Teo and Mehta 2001). Unless beset by physical impairments, older women lead much stronger “linked lives” in that they are more socially bonded with kin, friends, and neighbours because of the social roles they would have played in various events throughout their life course (Lopata and Levy 2003, p. 4). In contrast, older men have been found to suffer from increasing social disadvantage and isolation compared with older women as they lack strong ties with family members and friends. Others have observed a similar pattern. Chappell (1989), for example, based on research in the United States, discovered that older women have more expressive and supportive bonds and are more intimately connected with others, unlike men who turn to their wives for similar support. Furthermore, older men are unable to turn to wider sources of social support should such support become unavailable from their own family members (Seale and Charteris-Black 2008). In this regard, divorced and never married older men tend to experience greater social isolation than older women of the same marital status. Among them, living alone has the cumulative effect of leading to loneliness, with never married men experiencing the highest levels of loneliness while never married women experiencing the lowest levels of loneliness. Moreover, older men more than older women are more likely to suffer from depression on the demise of their spouses (Victor et al. 2002).

It is clear then from the above selected litany of characteristics differentiating men and women that the experience of ageing is varied across the sexes. Focusing on differentials — both real and potential — between older men and women, feminists have long argued that older women are doubly disadvantaged compared with older men (Arber and Ginn 1995); in a nutshell, they contend that the disadvantages faced by older women are intrinsically entwined with the experiences they have had throughout their life course, whether in the family, education, health, and politics, which further compound their vulnerability to poverty, social deprivation, and poor health in old age (see also Gist and Velkoff 1997; Browne 1998). In other words, the disadvantages older women face are linked to structural and socio-cultural factors which had marginalized them earlier on in life and which then become further pronounced in old age. While this argument may to some degree be compelling, a more

nuanced and accurate insight is that older women need not always and in all circumstances be disadvantaged; on the contrary, older men have been found to be disadvantaged in some situations. Thus while we may be taken in by “the images conjured up of ageing woman [as] more derogatory than those of ageing man ... [a] contrast ... due to an equally pervasive sexism”, in reality, “older people of both sexes are victims ...” (Jefferys 1996, p. 684). In this case, a more balanced perspective that accommodates both older men’s and women’s varying vulnerabilities has been proposed, leading some scholars to conclude instead that gender should be treated as a potential rather than a central marker of vulnerability for both older men and women (Knodel and Ofstedal 2003).

Following this conceptual lead, the chapters in this book aim to advance our understanding of the differences between how men and women in Southeast Asia have come to experience ageing. Related to this, the book also aims to uncover if these experiences are unique to older men and women from the region or if similar patterns have been found among older persons in other parts of the world. In other words, are there “cultural scripts” (Mehta 1997*b*) or “cultural spaces” (Long 2005) particular to this region which would have dictated the ageing trends among both men and women (as cited in Sokolovsky 2009, p. xxiii)?

Focusing the analytical lens on Southeast Asia in an attempt to understand the link between gender and ageing makes for an interesting and important exercise since the region, unlike the rest of Asia or, for that matter, other parts of the world, is marked by a significant measure of gender egalitarianism as expressed in a number of arenas. It has been argued that *adat* (Malay; tradition) and kinship organization have actively formulated the position of women through men in non-hierarchical ways (Wazir Jahan Karim 1992). For example among the indigenous populations, kinship systems found operating in this region are mainly bilateral or matrilineal, with the exception of the northern reaches of Vietnam (Dube 1997) and small pockets of ethnic groups in the Indonesian archipelago where the patrilineal kinship system instead dominates. Moreover, women’s position in their families and communities in this region is unlike their counterparts in the rest of Asia. While they may be “dutiful daughters” and “devoted wives”, Southeast Asian women enjoy an autonomy, like no other women from the rest of Asia (Atkinson and Errington 1990; Stoler 1977; Strange 1981; Wolf 1990, 1992). For example, unlike in South Asia where the route to remarriage is closed completely to a woman who has lost her husband through death since widowhood is associated with inauspiciousness, widows from Southeast

Asia do not suffer the same plight. A case in point is widow remarriage in Indonesia where women are encouraged to remarry, not necessarily in conformity to the “heterosexual patriarchal family”, as argued elsewhere (Wieringa 2012, p. 519), but rather so that they do not become vulnerable to neglect and abandonment. In Kelantan, young widows usually remarried and with ease and no loss of status, while older women seldom remarried because they tended to be less sought after (Douglas Raybeck, personal communication, 20 February 2013). Even in Vietnam, widows are allowed to remarry although it is considered virtuous if they chose to remain faithful to their deceased husbands (O’Harrow 1985).

That men turn over their earnings to their wives who control the household budget is another arena in which Southeast Asian women’s autonomy and decision-making power are demonstrated (Li 1989; Sullivan 1994; Swift 1965). In fact, a woman’s authority rises with age such that it is not uncommon to find an older woman “slough[ing] off disagreeable chores on daughters or daughters-in-law ... [to] mark ... their increasing authority within the household” (Carsten 1997, p. 78). Moreover in marriage, maternal kin play an important role in the conjugal life of a newly-wed couple as exemplified by the fact that on marriage a couple usually chooses to stay with the bride’s kin for a few years until they set up their own household (Jamilah Ariffin 1992; Medina 2001). Daughters, in fact, are held in high regard and never seen to be a financial burden. In matters of property relations, women also enjoy a distinct advantage, especially according to *adat* (Stivens 1996).

In addition, women’s autonomy and power are not restricted to the private domain. In Southeast Asia, women exert a strong presence in village markets as entrepreneurs and their earnings have been critical to the maintenance of the family (Alexander and Alexander 2001). In fact among Kelantanese women of Peninsular Malaysia, Raybeck (1980/1981, p. 10) maintains that it is the “middle-aged married woman [who] is usually a more active participant in the economic and social life of the village than is her husband”. In embracing economic responsibilities, these women come to assert more strength and assertiveness — traits which become heightened among middle-aged or older women, markedly separating this group from the younger women (Raybeck 1985; Carsten 1997). That widows are not barred from engaging in economic activities is also a testimony to the position they hold in wider society. In Indonesia for example, Wieringa (2012, p. 522) points out how “working outside the house affords them a measure of social respect because they

are seen as responsible parents". Moreover, women play prominent roles in indigenous religious rituals as shamans who engage in exorcism, spiritual healing, agricultural magic, and so forth as much as men (Hay 2005). The power these women wield is also demonstrated in their skills in managing ceremonial feasts, and the organization of labour and credit societies as well.

But while women in the region do enjoy a fair amount of power in comparison to their sisters in other parts of the world, this does not mean that there is an absence of overt and covert manifestations of patriarchy (Mazidah Zakaria and Nik Safiah Karim 1986; Ong 1987). In recent times, the region has seen the emergence of fundamentalisms, particularly religious fundamentalisms as exemplified in conservative Islamic teachings. Moreover, it cannot be denied that women continue to face obstacles in entering some spheres in the public domain — a case in point being that of politics (Raybeck 1980/1981). In this case, women's lack of social networks and the unfair practices they encounter which exclude them, as well as religious traditions that reinscribe gender inequality through their teachings serve to tip the balance in favour of men.

Furthermore, gender inequality has been found in other arenas such as in the labour markets driven by neoliberalism. As in many parts of the world, the countries in Southeast Asia have not been shielded from global economic forces. According to AT Kearney, six cities in Southeast Asia — Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City — are now among the 66 most globalized cities in the world (AT Kearney 2012). Moreover, the region has long been recognized as a fast developing region in the world accompanied by impressive economic growth indicators. Strong levels of growth have been attributed to high savings rates, the creation of human capital, market reforms, the role of state intervention, cultural ideologies namely the Confucianist ethic, and the emergence of labour-intensive export manufacturing industries (Kaur 2004).

Given that Southeast Asia has undergone immense economic and social changes in recent decades as a result of globalization, it becomes necessary to examine the experience of ageing in light of how global forces have shaped everyday lives. Young women and men have increasingly been drawn away from farm work into the non-farm sectors. Opting to work abroad through labour migration has become part of the narrative of globalization in many places. But large numbers of young women, in particular, have found themselves in low-skilled occupations more than their male counterparts because of possessing lower literacy levels and

fewer job-related skills. Moreover, that gender stereotyping continues to persist in the labour sector begs the question of whether wage work presents a site of empowerment for women (Salih and Young 1991 as cited in Elson 1999). For example, upward mobility in the wage work sector has not always been in women's favour (see Elson 1999 for specific examples from South Asia). In fact, often women end up in low-skilled, feminized sectors such as domestic work, nursing and other forms of care work, factory work, sex work, and the service and entertainment industries — sectors that do not pay as much as others dominated by men (Brooks and Devasahayam 2011; Resurrection 2009). That women end up in low-skilled employment sectors that pay much less than low-skilled jobs undertaken by men also suggests that they would have fewer resources when they reach old age. Furthermore, women are more likely than men to be retrenched in times of economic downturn.

Against this backdrop, the book is concerned with the following questions related to gender and ageing in Southeast Asia. These questions include: (a) how do women and men experience old age? (b) do women and men have different means of coping financially and socially in their old age? (c) does having engaged in wage work for longer periods of time serve as an advantage to older men in contrast to older women? (d) does women's primary role as caregiver disadvantage her in old age? (e) what kinds of identities have older women and men constructed for themselves? (f) do women and men prepare for ageing differently and has this been mediated by educational levels? Related to this, does having a higher education make a difference in how one experiences ageing? (g) how does class shape how women and men cope in old age? and (h) what does it mean to be a "single" older person who has lost a spouse through death or has never been married?

In exploring answers to these questions, the chapters in this book, which employ either quantitative or qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, provide interesting insights into how ageing, as experienced by men and women in Southeast Asia, has become tempered by globalization, cultural values, family structures, women's emancipation and empowerment, social networks, government policies, and religion. This compendium is insightful in yet another way since the chapters approach the ageing experience across the sexes from a comparative perspective. Adopting a comparative perspective is useful in two aspects. First, by employing a cross-country analysis, highlighting common themes related to gender and ageing in the different countries in the region, readers gain an understanding of the emergent trends not only in each of the

countries but also in Southeast Asia as a whole. Second, the countries in the region of Southeast Asia are analysed in juxtaposition to countries in other regions with the intent of facilitating an understanding of whether the trends in Southeast Asia are similar or dissimilar to the broader trends of gender and ageing found in the rest of the world. To this end, an underlying assumption in this book is that the emergent trends related to gender and ageing in the selected countries chosen for analysis need not necessarily be unique to the region, especially when similar trends have been found in other parts of the world.

MAPPING OUT THE CHAPTERS

Sociologists have long been concerned with class inequalities in educational attainment, especially the failure of working-class children in obtaining education (Haveman and Smeeding 2006). The assumption here is that should education be available across the different classes, it would have the potential of breaking down social inequalities. Feminist research, in contrast, has been concerned with looking at how schooling has perpetuated gender inequalities, for example, how girls end up studying certain subjects while boys read others and how the educational system privileges boys while disadvantaging girls (Abbott, Wallace and Tyler 2005). Whatever the gender gap, one distinct difference in the area of education between the sexes has emerged across the world, that is, that men outnumber women in terms of having received schooling although this trend has gradually reversed especially among the current generations in some developed and developing countries. The gender gap in education in favour of boys over girls, which has been consistently found in many parts of the world, has bolstered the argument that having lower levels of education has been a factor of vulnerability for women, which has a cumulative effect in old age, compared with men who have higher levels of education. As in other parts of the world, Southeast Asia has seen fairly consistent trends in this regard as generally more men than women have attained an education. This trend persists despite the fact that a greater degree of gender equality exists in this part of the world compared with others. In fact, it is normative in the rural areas to think of marriage and motherhood as the destiny for girls. For some Muslim communities, it is unlikely that women will engage in paid employment after marriage and therefore an education may not be highly valued for girls. In part, cultural norms in this case could be

used to explain the gender gap in education between older men and women in Southeast Asia.

In Thailand, for example, John Knodel and Napaporn Chayovan in their chapter show that higher percentages of older women than older men have no more than a primary education and a lower percentage have upper secondary or higher education. But this trend only applies to the present cohort of older persons. The authors note that changes in this trend are imminent especially based on projected figures for the next 35 years because of greater numbers of Thai women currently receiving an education — a trend which is expected to occur as countries gain greater momentum in terms of development, coupled with greater numbers of women joining the labour force. Aside from Thailand, other countries in the region also display similar gaps in education. While current cohorts of older persons have lower educational attainment compared to future older cohorts, Aris Ananta shows that in Indonesia, more men than women have been found to have higher educational qualifications — a trend he asserts will continue into the future generation. Surprisingly, a gender gap in education is also evident in the Philippines, as pointed out by Josefina N. Natividad, Yasuhiko Saito and Grace T. Cruz. What is striking about the Philippines is that the difference in educational profile between the sexes is not as pronounced as for the older cohorts in the rest of Southeast Asia. In terms of education, Cambodia represents the outlier in this regard. John Knodel and Zachary Zimmer note that a large majority of elderly men and women have not had formal schooling, affecting literacy levels. Yet among the young old (age 60–64), 84 per cent of men were found to be literate as compared with 29 per cent of women. One probable explanation for this gender gap was that men would have spent some time as monks and as a consequence learnt to read and write.

Beyond these numbers, what would be more important is to ask what then are the implications of the gender gap in education among current and future cohorts of the elderly? In this case, does education empower or translate into empowerment for women? Since education determines labour market outcomes as it enables the individual to attain the desired skills, among older women who have either had lower levels of education or no education compared with their male counterparts, their ability to compete in the labour market diminishes considerably. Moreover, women (and men) benefit from an education since it ensures greater earnings within an occupation which translates into savings and, in turn, becomes

critical especially for old-age survival. In this regard, Vipan Prachuabmoh effectively demonstrates in her chapter the extent to which educational levels correlate with preparations for old age in Thailand and, in particular, how having lower levels of education among women puts them at higher risk of not being prepared for old age and how higher levels of education improves their chances in this regard. Among the present cohorts of older persons age 60 and above, she shows how males are more likely than females to have made some old age preparation. The areas in which they would have undertaken some form of preparation concern their physical health, living arrangement, financial security, and arrangement for a caregiver. If women make preparations for old age, however, they tend to be restricted in looking out for their mental health only. Among the near and far away future elderly cohorts (age 18–59), a surprising (or not so surprising) trend has been found in that greater numbers of these women have been found to have made preparations for old age. But this stronger inclination to prepare for old age is bound up with higher levels of education among younger women. In fact, Thailand represents an outstanding example of a country in the region in which girls have been found to be “overachievers” in the education system (Devasahayam 2005). While this may give rise to a “moral panic” in wider Thai society as well as among policy-makers as women’s educational success may be seen to challenge male hegemony, for this cohort of future elderly, according to Prachuabmoh’s analysis, attaining higher education clearly has its positive outcomes. In comparison with the present cohort of older women, she finds that the future cohort shows a marked difference in their efforts to prepare for old age particularly in terms of financial security and physical health, in addition to their mental health. It may be concluded, thus, that higher levels of education among young females compared to their male counterparts would eventually lead to higher levels of old age preparation among the future generations of older Thai women.

Along the same lines, Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan’s chapter highlights the link between levels of education although this time with health outcomes in old age. In contrast to Prachuabmoh’s discussion, Teerawichitchainan’s analysis points to how lower levels of education among Vietnamese women have severely disadvantaged them as they have been found to be in poorer health. In fact in Vietnam, a distinct gender gap has been found with half of older women age 60 and above being illiterate and slightly over one-third having had only some primary education, while only about one-fifth had completed primary education.

In contrast among older Vietnamese men, an overwhelming majority have had at least completed basic education evinced by a quarter having finished primary schooling and one-third having some secondary education. Since the cohort of older men has received an education more than their female counterparts, the former is better informed about health-related issues. Moreover, having an education also relates to being economically more well-off compared to those with minimal or no education and, in this case, the Vietnamese men who have had an education would be in a better position to access healthcare and, in turn, enjoy a more improved health status compared with women. In fact, in assessing self-reported health status, Teerawichitchainan found that, more than gender, having had higher levels of education and being financially more solvent have a greater impact on health since these factors lead individuals to be more optimistic about their health status. What in fact her chapter does is to highlight a more nuanced discussion of health disparities based on subjective and objective measures of health. She found that the difference in health disparities that showed up between men and women was a result of a discrepancy between the subjective and objective measures of health rather than an actual difference in health status between the sexes — a trend which has been documented elsewhere in that elderly women were found to assess their own health less positively than older men (Arber and Ginn 1993; Verbrugge 1985). Moreover, among the more well-off who have access to economic resources, they are more likely to have greater access to healthcare and, in turn, are more equipped to provide accurate reporting about their health status.

Undoubtedly, Southeast Asia has seen gender gaps closing in the areas of education and health in recent decades, as women gain a stronger foothold in various job sectors, and improve their access to economic resources because of having received an education compared with the earlier generations. Concomitantly, family structures have been changing rapidly resulting from the transformations in women's lives. In spite of fertility rates plummeting and marriage patterns changing as younger people seek to marry later or to abandon the idea of marriage completely (Jones 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009*b*), a point raised earlier, yet for the majority, marriage remains the norm. But in spite of women taking on the role of financially contributing towards the household through their engagement in wage work, the dominant pattern in Southeast Asian families, as in many other parts of the world, is that women are ascribed the primary role of caregiver and nurturer while men the breadwinner role (Devasahayam and Yeoh 2007). This trend continues into old age

when women continue to play the role of caregiver, however, this time to their own spouses. In Thailand, John Knodel and Napaporn Chayovan find that more than half of the men reported that their spouses were their caregivers compared to only 12 per cent of women. Nonetheless, 45 per cent of women residing with their husbands indicated that husbands are their main caregiver. Evidence from Sarawak by Ling How Kee in her chapter shows a similar trend with women more likely to end up playing the role as caregiver whether to their spouses or other men in both formal and informal systems of care. Support initiatives directed by the state or provided by non-governmental organizations to complement and bolster the role of the family as informal carer, however, are almost non-existent. In this case, the family is left with three choices: a woman in the family takes on the primary role of elder caregiver, or she could shift the burden of caregiving to a hired domestic worker, or as a last resort, the family admits the older person to a residential home. The first two scenarios, however, are the most esteemed options, exemplifying the paramount role women play in the organization of care towards an older person while the latter is less popular since it suggests abandonment and neglect.

In fact, in a region where daughters are valued, it is of no surprise that receiving care provided by daughters tends to be the preferred option when children are relied upon for help. John Knodel and Zachary Zimmer find that in Cambodia, daughters play a paramount role in care provision both for older men and women whether currently married or not. Philip Kraeger and Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill raise a similar point when they describe the preference for the support of daughters among the elderly in Indonesia. While this may be the case across Indonesia, this preference is heightened among the Minangkabau, a matrilineal kinship group from Sumatra, since they look to daughters to take care of the management and continuity of the ancestral property. Among them, therefore, the absence of a daughter through *merantau* (Indonesian; to go abroad) causes anxiety among the elderly. In the case of Sarawakian Chinese, Ling How Kee in her chapter highlights how there are many instances in her research where she has found married daughters returning home or receiving parents into their matrimonial homes to provide respite care for their parents. Yet the role of sons cannot be underestimated, as discussed by Tey Nai Peng and Tengku Aizan Tengku Hamid in their chapter. They show that in Malaysia, sons tend to be the main source of financial support to older persons more than daughters. The vital role of daughters in eldercare has also been documented in other parts of

the world aside from Southeast Asia. In the United States, it was found that women more than men expect that their daughters will come to their aid, while daughters have been found to willingly respond to the needs of their mothers (Hogan and Eggebeen 1995). In another study in Belgium, female family members ranging from wives, daughters, and sisters each played a different yet critical role in caregiving of various forms including care provided towards an aged person. In a nutshell, women are “the glue holding social relations together” at every stage of the life course (Bracke, Christiaens and Wauterickx 2008, p. 1348). In a study of three urban locales in China, it was found that daughters provided a higher level of support towards their parents compared with sons, especially if these women had personal resources. These women also chose to coreside with their parents instead of with their husbands’ parents, defying patrilineal kinship rules (Xie and Zhu 2006).

As in East Asia, coresidence with adult children is not unheard of in Southeast Asia where it is “often seen as an assurance of care”, as Ling How Kee mentions, since adult daughters or sons continue to form an important source of physical care for the elderly. There are two sides to the coin, however, on this issue. While children play an immensely important role in eldercare by ensuring that the material, financial, psychological, and emotional needs of the older person are met, coresidence may also benefit children as they have been found to capitalize on this living arrangement as an economic strategy for survival. An example of this living arrangement was noted by Grace T. Cruz and others who found that in the Philippines, children coreside with the older person rather than the other way around since it is the older person who owns the house and not the children. Having said that, it was found that childlessness was perceived to be a source of anxiety among both older men and women. Philip Kraeger and Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill present a fascinating example of a childless man from Java whose vulnerability became heightened as a result of not having a spouse or children to care for him. The authors, however, make the interesting point that his vulnerability through the lack of a child to provide care to him is enmeshed with poverty and failed marriages rather than gender identity alone.

Aside from highlighting that women play an integral role as caregivers of the elderly, much of the broader literature on ageing is fixated on showing how women become disadvantaged in old age because of lacking a caregiver in spite of providing care to others for most of their lives. In fact the norm is that more men than women end up citing their spouse as the main caregiver, as it is in the case of Thailand. But it must be

emphasized that this trend occurs because of widowhood rather than for reasons of gender alone. For example in Thailand, John Knodel and Napaporn Chayovan show that because women have longer longevity than men — a pattern found around the world as well — living alone is more common among older women than older men while older men are more likely to live only with a spouse than are older women. On whether the absence of a spouse serves to heighten the vulnerability of women, based on the data from Cambodia, John Knodel and Zachary Zimmer unravelled an interesting finding in that widows need not necessarily be disadvantaged, as might be assumed. In fact, they found that those not currently married are more likely to report receiving help and not receiving help but needing it as well as not receiving enough of it compared with those who are married. Among them, men (57 per cent) are more likely to be found in this unfavourable situation compared with women (34 per cent), suggesting that it is the married state rather than gender that bears advantages as men would have sought help from their own spouses should they not have been left widowed (Yin 2008). In the same vein, Teerawichitchainan finds that in Vietnam, regardless of sex, the data highlights that it is the married state that provides a protective cover for older men or women, this time of the older person's health and well-being; in this case, those who are married are more likely to be more positive about their health.

But while living alone may be more common for older women, they need not necessarily be more vulnerable as a result, as mentioned earlier. In fact, based on the rich case studies presented in this volume, women have been found to have stronger social networks which have helped them cope with loneliness, a point which was also raised by others (Allan 1985; Jerrome 1996). Thang Leng Leng argues that while older women in Singapore may fare less positively compared to older men in some respects, the situation may be reversed when it comes to their social well-being. Based on rich data collected from older persons living in low-income, one-room rental apartments in Singapore, she discovered that the older women had more contact with their kin and fictive kin compared with the older men. Among these women, she found that if contact with children was limited, they would instead have maintained considerable contact with their own siblings or whosoever they recognized as good friends. It was the strength of women, such as in social networking with others, which helped them overcome some of their vulnerabilities and enhanced their well-being. In a cultural context dominated by women, Philip Kraeger and Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill speak to the

vulnerability experienced by Indonesian men because of their inability to build social networks. They emphasize that differences in elderly support depend largely on the values and demands of network members. In her chapter on Singapore, Kalyani Mehta also points out that while social support is important for both widows and widowers, she found that the widows she interviewed had stronger support networks and experienced lower levels of emotional and social isolation compared with the widowers in her sample. Hence, she says that while widows are financially “worse off” than widowers, they tend to be “socially” better off than their male counterparts. Such a finding is not unique to Singapore or the region. In the United States, Krekula (2007) found that older women not only had stronger social networks, but also had varying interests compared with older men and, therefore, were able to assert their competence and independence, thereby providing a buffer against loneliness and social isolation. In Southeast Asia, as in the United States, it was primarily children who were the main source of support for the elderly, with widows having greater contact with their children compared with widowers (Ha et al. 2006). This idea is also echoed by Ling How Kee who asserts that women are “accorded a special social position in the family and [in turn] receive reciprocity of support from their children”.

For this reason, being financially “worse off” than older men was not necessarily found to be a liability among older women. In the case of Singapore, Thang Leng Leng in her chapter remarks that the same individuals who maintained a more active kin network have also been found to be able to protect themselves against financial hardships. Interestingly, the reverse is also true: because women rely more heavily on children’s contributions as a source of income, it is of no surprise that they are more likely than men to be in frequent contact with at least one child. In contrast, John Knodel and Zachary Zimmer found that there was little difference between older men and women in Cambodia in terms of social contact with and material support from children. Besides, very few older persons seem to be deserted by their families. But as the authors point out, these variations may be because of the fact that many older people in Cambodia would have lived difficult lives, having faced harsh circumstances related to war and poverty, and thus older persons irrespective of gender have shown to be equally dependent on the younger generation. But if they are unable to receive support from a child, some older persons have been found to turn to government agencies, as Kalyani Mehta describes in the case of Singapore — a country in the region which underwent the fastest growth, in the proportion of older persons

in relation to the larger population, at an unprecedented rate of 4.2 per cent in 1975–2000 (Mujahid 2006). Most of these individuals turn to welfare only because their own children have been struggling financially and have been unable to help. The element of “shame” in this sense has prevented many from seeking help, therefore putting older women more than men at risk of slipping into poverty. In contrast in Indonesia, because children are a significant source of income, childless older persons are particularly vulnerable such that alternative strategies to ensure income protection become imperative for survival. In rural Java, for example, childless couples have resorted to adoption depending on their own socio-economic position and employment through continued patronage and kin support, as well as the charitable support they receive from neighbours, distant kin, and religious institutions (Schröder-Butterfill and Kraeger 2005).

It would seem then that across Southeast Asia, older women are more likely to be dependent on others for survival compared with older men. In this regard, it could be said instead that there are degrees of dependence mediated by the educational level of the elderly person. Ha and her colleagues (2006) found that widows in the United States depended on their children for financial or legal advice and instrumental support although the more educated the widow, the less likely she would be dependent on her children. On this, Kalyani Mehta found in her study in Singapore that older women were more “forthcoming in requesting for help than men”, while widowers were less likely to rely on others for financial help because of the fear of being regarded as a failure. Here, the old age cohort of the widows she studied comprised an earlier generation in which not many women would have had high levels of education. Thus, we can expect that current cohorts of women are more likely to mimic their counterparts elsewhere in that they would be less dependent on kin support should they reach old age themselves.

That current cohorts of older women have been found to be dependent on others was revealed in another context. As economies become more integrated as a result of globalization, seeking wage work in the more urban areas of the country or even abroad has increasingly become the norm with growing numbers of younger women (Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez III 1999; Brooks and Devasahayam 2011; Yamanaka and Piper 2005). Considering households in which there are members employed abroad as overseas contract workers, findings from the Philippines by Grace T. Cruz and others show that about one-fifth of these households receive remittances from children working abroad, with significantly more married older people receiving funds from children overseas and with considerably

more older women than men considering these remittances from children abroad as their most important source of income.

Another interesting gendered pattern emerging in these households is that households with only one grandparent revealed that grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to live with the grandchild and to play the primary role of caregiver and nurturer, especially in the absence of a parent; in households with both grandparents, the trend continues to be marked by a sexual division of labour in which women more than men take on the role of childrearing, including providing care for grandchildren. Usually older women are more likely to find themselves in a “skipped generation” living arrangement more than older men — a trend in Thailand noted also by John Knodel and Napaporn Chayovan. Ling How Kee also relates a similar trend in Sarawak among single mothers who either leave their children with their rural or urban mothers while they work in the urban areas or if they take on work abroad. In the latter two situations, remittances sent home are for both the young and the old.

In fact, remittances are an important source of income more for older women than older men regardless of marital status among those whose children are working abroad. But clearly these older women are not dependent on the remittances they receive solely for their own survival. Rather, many use the remittances they receive for providing care towards their grandchildren. In this case, migrants working abroad do not remit money for altruistic reasons; instead, the remittance is necessary to ensure that the surrogate caregivers and, in this case, the older woman back home continues to provide care for the children of the migrant worker in his/her absence (cf. Secondi, 1997).¹ In a sense, older women are not only at the receiving end but play an integral role at the giving end by constantly providing care to others. This trend reinforces the point made by Agree and others (2005, p. 191) that: “generalized exchange may be more common in societies with higher poverty levels or where the lack of stable market alternatives makes family and friends the main means by which social and economic support is provided”. The term “exchange” in this case is most apt because it portrays older persons as active agents contributing to the relationship rather than only receiving resources.² Nevertheless, on the part of children working abroad, the practice of transferring resources is linked to the cultural concept of filial piety since expectations of children providing financial support and care towards their ageing parents continue to be strong in the region (Chow 1997).

While studies have highlighted how dependence on others, whether kin or non-kin, tends to be more common among older women, this pattern has been said to occur because older women are more likely to have fewer resources compared with older men. While this may be the case because of having spent fewer years in the labour force — a factor singled out as the reason for why older women are not as financially secure as older men — that this trend has been recorded across Southeast Asia may be indicative of several conditions: shortage of suitable work for women, lack of necessary educational and skill qualifications, and employer discrimination (Mujahid 2006). For example in Thailand, the 2007 Survey of Older Persons found that among those age 60 or above, 26 per cent of women worked compared with 48 per cent of men. Findings from the Philippines according to Josefina N. Natividad, Yasuhiko Saito, and Grace T. Cruz also show a similar trend in that there is high prevalence of working beyond age 60, higher for men than for women although the odds of working consistently decreases as age increases. Indonesia as a case is also no different. Aris Ananta makes the point that the labour force participation of women is much lower than men. But because the social security system is limited or completely non-existent as to be expected for a developing country, working for an income becomes imperative for them as well as their families' survival. Ananta also raises a fascinating point that the statistics for labour force participation for women are markedly lower compared with men because it has become socially acceptable for women to financially depend on their husbands who are expected to be the “rice winners” in the family. But interestingly, this pattern is found across the age groups, thereby suggesting that women have made a choice in deciding whether or not to work and it is a decision they can more easily make because they have husbands whom they can rely on. Thus among women, prioritizing care provision towards their children and having less savings compared with men — because they have not engaged in wage work — need not necessarily be a disadvantage since they can depend on their spouses financially. Conversely, men are not presented with the same choices: they are forced to work in conformity to social expectations of their breadwinner role and, as such, their numbers are much higher than women's in terms of labour force participation.

But should they have worked and the majority would have had, older men are more likely than older women to access pensions as a source of income while for older women, children are by far the most

common main source of income. In Cambodia, John Knodel and Zachary Zimmer document that although men are more likely than women to have worked and therefore have a pension income, on a positive note there is little gender difference taking into account other indicators of material well-being such as housing quality, household possessions, and self-assessed economic situation, although as the authors caution, this needs to be “interpreted within the context of widespread poverty” among both men and women. The Malaysian case shows a stark contrast. Tey Nai Peng and Tengku Aizan Tengku Hamid show that older men were more than twice as likely to receive income from their current job and/or pension payment from previous jobs compared with older women. In this case, older women, who make up the majority of the oldest old, are generally more vulnerable than older men because they lack financial resources and, as a result, are more dependent on children and others. That women have less access compared with men to a state-sponsored pension scheme was also found in other countries in the region. In the Philippines, more males are employed, receive pensions, and earn their subsistence from their own earnings from work and farm and, as a result, are less dependent on their children for economic support, as pointed out by Grace T. Cruz and others. In contrast, greater numbers of older women compared with older men consider support from their children as their most important source of income. Interestingly, while women’s dependence on children is associated with economic insecurity, these same women report a better profile in terms of household wealth index and overall subjective self-assessed economic status. In contrast in the Thai case, both children and work are almost equally common as sources of financial support for men, thereby reducing men’s vulnerability slightly in contrast to the experience of older women.

PROTECTING THE ELDERLY: THE ROLE OF POLICIES

The feminist contention is that women are oppressed in many spheres of life — an oppression that has a cumulative effect on them which continues into old age. In this case, “the interplay between age and gender has frequently been characterized as a double jeopardy. The combination of sexism and ageism supposedly makes women’s ageing more problematic than men’s” (Krekula 2007, p. 161). While undoubtedly women have their share of vulnerabilities in old age as discussed earlier in this chapter, these vulnerabilities need to be assessed within the context of globalization,

capitalism, and wage work such that the capitalist workplace tends to generate inequality between the sexes rather than emphasize equality which would have been the case if indigenous gender ideologies were operating. But while this factor may in part explain women's share of vulnerabilities, in other areas, older women have been found to have an edge over older men.

The case studies raised in this volume demonstrate poignantly how Southeast Asian men and women in their experience of ageing might have their respective share of vulnerabilities, and the extent to which each sex might be disadvantaged, although differently from the other depending on the context. For example, in the case of widowers, they are less likely than widows to coreside with a child and, as a result, are compelled to cope with loneliness and are less likely than older women to have the option of depending financially on a child. Among men, weaker social networks have the potential of disadvantaging them as the likelihood of not receiving physical care from kin or friends among them is much greater than for older women. What then would the solutions be for this group of men? Perhaps retirement homes or retirement villages may be a possible option, especially if they are generally able to care for themselves. But that such a solution carries with it a hefty price tag may not necessarily make this the most feasible option especially for developing countries in the region. In any case, the right policies targeted at this group of older men become even more important in ensuring that their specific needs are not overlooked.

Older men have been found to be vulnerable in another respect. While they may be financially better off than older women, often assumed to be an advantage they have over older women, being financially more secure because of receiving a pension or because of savings accumulated over a lifetime as a result of having worked does not necessarily protect older men at all times. Because of strong social expectations placed on them as breadwinners of the family, this role expectation is often carried into old age. In fact, older men are more likely than older women to continue to provide shelter and render financial help to adult children who are yet to move out of the household. While throughout their lives older men might have been financially more solvent compared with older women, ironically older men are also more likely to experience more debt than older women although this difference becomes insignificant when controlling for marital status. The most common types of liabilities older men have include personal loans, followed by loans from moneylenders.

Thus, it is not always the case that they are able to financially care for themselves. In this case, eldercare policies should factor in this concern of older men's. For example in Singapore, while this move may be regarded as draconian, the state has made it legal through the Maintenance of Parents Act for older persons to take up a court case against their children who fail to provide them with support. In this case, the law uses "the rhetoric of filial piety to emphasize the principle of familism ... [In doing so] the bill clearly places financial risks and responsibilities not on the community but solely on the individual, i.e., the older person first and then his or her adult children" (Rozario and Hong 2011, pp. 616, 618). Since the Act came into force in 1996, there have been 1,411 applications for maintenance, and of this number, 1,047 maintenance orders were implemented (Lim 2009). Since then, there has been an increase in the number of applications filed from the usual annual rate of 100 with the bulk of applicants being men of Chinese descent, and single parents who either have been divorced or widowed, suggesting that older men more often than older women face neglect by their own relatives.

In spite of the relatively high status women in this region enjoy, two chief concerns arise relating to how well they are able to cope in older age, namely, the absence of a caregiver and the lack of savings. As for older women in Southeast Asia, as with their sisters across the world, their primary role tends largely to be confined to nurturing, indicating that the male as breadwinner and female as caregiver model continues into old age. But among divorced and widowed women in the Western hemisphere who may have neglected their careers to provide care for their children (Arber 2004), the stronger social links women in Southeast Asia would have developed throughout their lifetime serves as a protective measure for them in old age. While the feminist position is that the family is a site for oppression since housework and the caregiving labour a woman puts in are essentially "hidden labour" and never acknowledged as work (Abbott, Wallace and Tyler 2005, p. 231; cf. Oakley 1974*a*; 1974*b*), paradoxically as a Southeast Asian woman gets older, the labour she had provided in her lifetime to others serves to benefit her as she can now turn to her own children for assistance in her old age. Thus, needing a caregiver in old age need not necessarily be considered a liability since it is considered acceptable for older women to turn to children for help particularly with the loss of a spouse through death, as shown in this volume. In fact, their reliance on children ensures that they are financially protected as well, even though they might not have worked or had spent fewer years engaged in wage work compared with men or, for that matter, received less pay for the same work as carried

out by men. While this may be interpreted as a lack of independence and security, in societies where the “self” is relational, such as those in Southeast Asia, interpersonal dependence may not necessarily be regarded as a negative trait. Being dependent on others for assistance and rendering help to the elderly who are in need of help continue to be a cultural value largely accepted among the young and old — a value differentiating much of the Western hemisphere from Southeast Asia. To a large extent then it may be said that social networks continue to be relatively strong in Southeast Asian communities in spite of the region’s demographic changes, greater emancipation of women, and the impact of globalization felt in this region in recent decades. But herein lies the danger: to assume that these social networks are always operative and can and will never fail is a fallacy given that the size of families are shrinking because fertility rates are dropping; and it is for this reason that it becomes imperative through relevant policies to ensure that no one falls through the cracks.

For example, should an older woman’s relatives not be able to render assistance to her because of their own financial struggles, which is more likely to occur in poorer households, or if her relationship with them has not been cordial, she may find herself in a disadvantaged situation. In this case, targeted policies need to be put in place to ensure that the well-being of such older women is protected. Related to this, we may ask what then of the unmarried older woman since it is the unmarried individuals who face potential vulnerability more than their married counterparts because of the lack of a spouse on whom they can depend? As noted elsewhere (Mujahid 2006), it is the unmarried or “single” women who are more likely, as a consequence of not having a spouse, to be less solvent and lack access to care should they fall ill or become disabled. Moreover in some countries such as in male-dominated Vietnam where the patrilineal kinship system operates (Dube 1997), widowhood has been found to pose a “psychological strain” on older women, leaving them to feel more marginalized than if their husbands were still around (Mujahid 2006, p. 17). What of all the single or unmarried women who have had to leave the labour force or take on flexible work to provide care towards their own aged parents? These women are also equally vulnerable as they may not have ample savings for themselves when they reach old age (Devasahayam 2003). Thus in spite of the high status of women in this region, there are women who might slip through the cracks. For these groups of women then, policies targeted at their specific needs are ever more important so that they do not fall behind in their old age.

By way of conclusion, it must be noted that in much of Southeast Asia, the dual factors of strong social expectations on individual behaviour on one hand, and limited state initiatives targeted at the elderly on the other, continue to operate in tandem with each other, reinforcing the family as the primary site of eldercare. The family context presents a site for the complex interplay of factors. Intergenerational exchanges have been found to occur in both directions: while children can expect to receive help such as care provided by their own ageing parents towards their own children (or grandchildren) and at the same time older persons might find themselves to be contributing financially towards their children's well-being in spite of struggling against the odds of survival themselves, there is also the scenario of the filial son or daughter who continues to provide for his/her aged parent — financially, materially, and emotionally — regardless of whether he/she receives anything in return. In both scenarios “the locally existing ‘morality’ and ‘consensus’ as to what an old person should be able to expect as a member of the community” remains a powerful force in shaping behaviour towards the elderly (Risseeuw 2001, p. 40). In these two vastly different outcomes, the elderly and the children of aged parents are keenly aware of their roles irrespective of their ages and the circumstances they may find themselves in.

This, however, does not preclude the fact that there should be relevant policies put in place to ensure that all — whether older men or women — are protected regardless of their socio-economic class background. Especially among older cohorts of women, for example, who have not been actively participating in the labour force, regardless of marital status, it is critical that social security schemes apply to them as well so as to meet the financial needs of this group since pensions would guarantee a certain amount of stability and independence (Marianti 2003). By implication then among those not hired in the formal labour sector, a relevant scheme should also be instituted to ensure that these individuals receive a lump sum of money on a monthly or annual basis to use in old age. Particularly unmarried women and men would benefit from this scheme which will ensure that these individuals are not neglected in old age (cf. Pfau and Giang 2008).

Furthermore, we cannot discount the fact that keeping older persons, whether men or women, active in the labour force may yet be another strategy to ensure their well-being and survival. Keeping older persons economically active in the workforce in fact could be a more effective policy strategy in some contexts, especially since people are living longer and the probability of exhausting one's savings is high given the rising rate

of inflation. This strategy, however, entails combating age barriers, altering employer behaviour and perceptions, and providing incentives to work longer and for employers to hire retired workers (Walker 2002), although such a remedy is also highly dependent on the health status of the individual. Having said this, especially among those in the lower socio-economic class group, this strategy, among other gains, would help prevent this group from slipping further into poverty. Furthermore, in countries where the social security system put in place has limited coverage, keeping older persons in the labour force may not only be wise but imperative to ensure financial independence among this cohort (Mujahid 2006).

The chapters in this book explicitly show how a range of social factors mediate the experience of ageing. Any policy for eldercare then should be sensitive to the social and cultural environment within which the elderly reside and function. To put it differently, “a well-rounded policy therefore has to seek ways to analyse the ... diverse familial and community settings, and ... varied notions of friendship, intergenerational relations and notions of ‘relatedness’” (Risseuw 2001, p. 32). Since the family continues to be the primary site for eldercare as dictated by social and cultural norms where filial piety continues to define the relationship between the younger and older generations and reinforced by government policy or, for that matter, the lack of relevant state interventions, taking on board “contextual indicators to assess certain cultural norms as well as the settings where these norms are most likely not to be adhered to” becomes paramount in eldercare policy-making so as to ensure that none within the older population will be neglected (Risseuw 2001, p. 32).

Within this context, the question of gender should arise since ageing impinges on women’s lives quite differently from men’s, as this volume demonstrates. While it can be expected that gender might surface as a critical intersecting variable in the lives of older persons in some contexts, in others it may not at all or at least not to such a great extent as other factors. In the light of this, since it has been found that men and women require different kinds of assistance as they adapt to life in old age, it follows then that creating services focusing on the specific domains where older men and women are most vulnerable may serve to enhance the effectiveness of the social intervention (cf. Ha et al. 2006). At other times, it becomes critical to decipher how age and gender as an analytical unit “encompass other social positions including race, class and ethnicity” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Ginn and Arber 1995;

McMullin 1995, as cited in Krekula 2007, pp. 159–60). In other words, what becomes integral to comprehending women's and men's vulnerability in old age for the purpose of policy-making is identifying and separating the overlapping strands of exclusion linked to class, educational background, marital status, ethnic origin/race, and religion. To this end, understanding the degree to which gender is a critical variable in old age as well as the contexts in which it is significant in the ageing discourse necessitates taking into account a combination of factors, and the purpose of this book is to elucidate this point.

Notes

1. Also to be noted, unlike in patrilineal Taiwan where the transfer activity is focused among lineal kin, Agree and others (2005) have found that in the Philippines, siblings aside from older persons are key benefactors of exchange resources.
2. John Knodel and Chanpen Saengtienchai (2005) make the point that although there are health and welfare benefits for persons living with HIV, the role of parents in support and care should not be underestimated. Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill (2004, p. 497) compellingly shows how grandparents are not only important in providing childcare and undertaking domestic tasks, but also in playing the role of “economic pillars” in families. See also Zimmer and Kim (2001).

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