



# PANORAMA

INSIGHTS INTO SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS



Konrad  
Adenauer  
Stiftung



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## PREFACE

Economic progress and political liberalisation have contributed greatly to tackling the challenges of poverty and inequality in Asia. Creating equal opportunities and ensuring equal treatment for women is a key concern for civil society groups and grassroots leaders across the region. Undoubtedly, in most parts of Asia, women today enjoy greater freedoms than their mothers did before them including improved access to healthcare, enhanced career opportunities, and increased participation in political decision-making. Nonetheless, key challenges persistently remain. Besides the need to further improve the basic living conditions for women, especially in the poorest countries in Asia, another prominent example refers to women's participation in the work force, where traditional structures continue to hinder them from reaching top positions in their respective careers. As Braema Mathiaparanam highlights in her article, this systemic neglect has potentially negative repercussions not only for society but also for the national economy at large. Instead, she argues, government policies need to focus on nurturing the potential of the female part of the workforce to stop them from falling behind their male competitors.

However, progressive government policies also need to be matched by a major shift in public perception concerning the role of men and women in society. Dr Regina M. Hechanova points to the traditional understanding of a women's role as that of a caregiver which continues to enjoy widespread support across Asia. Increasingly, women feel the pressure to juggle two tasks – contributing to the family income by joining the workforce while also fulfilling the traditional role of primary

care giver. Similarly, conservative religious interpretations undermine reform of outdated concepts of the role and status of women in Asian societies.

The articles presented in this edition of Panorama are testimony to the multitude of challenges faced by women across Asia in the struggle to create gender equality. They range from addressing a shift in traditional gender roles derived from advancing modernisation and globalisation to the need to identify ways and means to support women in their rightful quest to fully participate in the work-force as well as in political decision-making. The five writers whose papers are collected here are academics and activists from East Asia and Southeast Asia who shared their insight into the multi-faceted issue of gender equality with experts from across Asia and grassroots leaders from China during the recent 'Forum on Gender Issues' which was held in Xi'an, China from 19 to 20 October 2007. The Forum on Gender Issues is an annual meeting co-organised by the Regional office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Singapore and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) since 2005. In 2007, KAS and ISEAS jointly co-organised the "Forum on Gender Issues in East and Southeast Asia" for the first time with the Shaanxi Women's Federation (SWF).



Dr. Colin Dürkop  
Singapore, March 2008



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## AUTHORS

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# Work-Life Balance: The Philippine Experience in Male and Female Roles and Leadership

*Regina M. Hechanova*

## Introduction

From serving as the chief priestess of a tribe to fighting in the revolution, Filipina women have played an important role in the development of the nation from pre-colonial times to the present. The country currently ranks 35<sup>th</sup> in the United Nations Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) - one of the highest among developing nations. Even more importantly, the country holds the distinction of already having had two female Heads of State since 1986. Considering between the end of the Second World War and 1997 only 28 women had been elected as Heads of State or Government around the world this indicates the relatively high status afforded to Filipina women (United Nations, 1999).

Women in the Filipino family are viewed with much respect and are highly esteemed. This is quite unique in the Far East where women continue to walk behind men and are generally

taken as being inferior to men. Even before marriage, the Filipino woman is considered special. Unlike in other societies where the bride's parents give present to the groom, in the Philippines it is the opposite. Dowry in the Philippines means a gift of the groom's family presented to the bride (Fulgado, 1992).

In ancient times prior to Spanish colonialism, the Filipina wife was consulted by the husband who could not enter into any agreement or contract without her knowledge and approval. She also retained her maiden name. Traditionally, her married name was just added to her maiden name and all her children carried her maiden name as their middle name (Fulgado, 1992). Unfortunately, years of Spanish influence diminished this role and emphasised the subordination of women.

## **Gender Roles in the Filipino Family**

The Filipino family is generally considered paternalistic. The father is the acknowledged head of the Filipino family and the wife is the treasurer and purse-keeper of the family. It is not unusual to find a husband receiving an “allowance” from his wife after having handed over his entire pay check to her (Fulgado, 1992). Traditionally, mothers take on the majority of care giving roles such as preparing food, taking care of the house, helping children with their school work, attending to school matters, and disciplining children. Fathers, on the other hand, are responsible for earning an income while sharing the task of disciplining the children.

These gender stereotypes are also reflected in the children are brought up. Daughters are typically assigned household work (preparing food, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, feeding pets, tending to plants, cleaning and caring for younger siblings) to prepare her to be a wife. Sons, on the other hand, are assigned more physical chores such as farming and fishing for those living in rural areas (Liwag, Dela Cruz, & Macapagal, 2002).

However, it appears that these roles are beginning to change as more and more women share the burden of earning. In the 1960s, less than a third of Filipinas worked. Today, one out of two women works. Not surprisingly, there has been a rise in dual-career couples. Currently, both father and mother work outside the home in 37 percent of Filipino families (Hechanova, Uy, & Presbitero 2004).

Contemporary studies show that with more wives entering the workplace, men are gradually yielding to the pressure of getting more involved in household chores (McCann Erikson, 1996). In 1997, two of three female workers (66%) who responded to a 1997 Work Orientation Survey said that they are mainly responsible for domestic duties; 24 percent said that they shared duties with their partners; and 10 percent reported that others are responsible for domestic duties. Interestingly, among male workers, only 9 percent reported that they are mainly responsible for domestic duties, whereas 35 percent claimed that they share domestic duties (Hechanova, Uy, and Presbitero 2004). A recent study conducted by the author, however, reveals a more egalitarian division of household work. In this study of dual career couples with children, women reported to be responsible for slightly more than half (58%) of household responsibilities. The study also indicated generational differences. In the study, the share of women was 68% among those in their 50s, 59% for those in their 40s, 58% among those in their 30s and 50% among those in their 20's. A caveat to this, however is that the sample represented mostly professionals and white-collar workers. Whether the sharing of roles among lower-income and blue collar workers is becoming more egalitarian is still unknown.

## **Work-Life Balance**

The changing nature of the family is paralleled by changes in the workplace. Technological advancement, job loss, mergers and acquisitions, cut-throat

competition are putting pressure on organisations and their workers to work harder, better, and faster. As Filipino workers are faced with new demands, expectations, and roles, work occupies an increasing portion of people's lives with family and social life often playing only a secondary role.

The Work Foundation defines work-life balance as “[...] people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work (Visser & Williams, 2006). It is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society.” Thus although what constitutes work-life balance may be different for each person – the issue of work-life balance appears to hinge on two important concepts, namely flexibility and choice. Flexibility has to do with one's ability to fulfill obligations of both work and family life. Choice, on the other hand, has to do with one's control over work and family arrangements.

This paper examines these two concepts as it looks at work life balance in the Philippines. Furthermore, it looks at these concepts through the lens of gender as it describes how Filipino women seek to balance work and life.

## **Women in the Philippine Workforce**

### **Employment Options for Filipino Women**

The issue of work-life balance assumes that workers have a choice over the kind of work they do. Even if population and literacy rates are almost the same for

both genders, it is telling that in today's Philippine society, males continue to outnumber females by three to two in the labour force. The rate of unemployment has also always been higher for female workers than for male workers although the difference between male and female workers is getting smaller (Illo, 1997; NCRFW, 2003). The labour market also remains gender-segmented as male workers are still preferred in certain industries and female workers in others. The industry groups dominated by women are education (75.4%), health and social work (71.8%), as well as wholesale and retail trade (62.6%) (Illo, 1997).

The emergence of call centres and the outsourcing industry has bided well for women. The boom in the service industry (particularly call centre work) has opened more employment opportunities for both men and women. In addition, compensation in these industries is typically higher than average, making it very attractive especially among fresh graduates. However, the downside to this industry are the working hours, in particular the so-called ‘graveyard shifts’ (night shift), that may cause health and safety problems. A recently conducted study of the call centre industry suggests that one out of four workers is experiencing burnout. Typical symptoms reported were physical exhaustion, inability to sleep, and falling sick more often. Female workers who take on graveyard shifts also reported increased security risks because going home in the early hours of the morning makes them more vulnerable to thefts and other crimes. In addition, the issue of work-life

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balance also appears to be particularly salient for these workers. Because of the unusual working hours, call centre workers reported diminished contact time with family and friends. As one customer service representative recounted, *“I have no social life anymore because my friends have normal day jobs and I’m the only one working nights. I still live at home but hardly talk to my family anymore. Even when I am home, I am asleep so my parents just communicate with me via text”* (Hechanova, in press).

Although call centres have overall provided greater employment opportunities for women, the concentration of growth and development in a few urban and regional centres has made these jobs inaccessible to poor women in rural areas. Not surprisingly, a 1997 Work Orientation Survey revealed that women in the agricultural sector register the least satisfaction with their work. It is in this group of workers that we find the widest gap between work preferences and actual working conditions (Hechanova, Uy, and Presbitero 2004).

Thus, it seems that Filipino women may still have less employment options than Filipino men. The lack of employment opportunities has pushed more and more Filipinos into the informal sector. As of 2004, about half of all Filipino workers are in the informal sector – which means they are self-employed and unpaid family workers. Of these, forty percent are women doing mostly self-employment work such as sewing rags, doing laundry, vending food or petty goods or doing subcontracted piece-rate work for

export companies. These informal sector workers do not enjoy social protection because there are often no formal contracts but only verbal agreements on terms and conditions. Thus, informal sector workers generally suffer from irregular employment, low income, poor working conditions, and are not entitled to social security benefits. Child care is an issue that is particularly problematic among workers in the informal sector because, unlike professional women who can hire household help, the income of informal workers is not adequate to hire substitute child care. Another common issue in the informal sector is the limited access to credit (NCRFW, 2006).

### Equality in the Philippine Workplace

Filipino women have steadily progressed up the management hierarchy in recent years and have substantially advanced into middle management positions. In fact, Filipino women outnumber men 2:1 in administrative, management and executive positions in private and government offices (NCRFW, 2004).

Ironically, despite this, their climb to the top has been slow and difficult and top management in the Philippines remains male-dominated. The latest data from the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) show that only 5% of CEO’s in the Top 500 Philippine corporations are women (SEC, 2003). Moreover, women in top executive positions receive lower earnings than their male counterparts (NCRFW, 1995) and are found in areas deemed appropriate for them such as the arts, public relations, and personnel

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management (Eviota, 1992).

This representation of women is also evident in government positions. Although, the country is currently led by its second female president, a rare feat for any country, these women were not exactly elected under normal circumstances. Both female presidents came into power based on 'people power' revolutions. Females represented only 20% of all candidates in the 1995 senatorial election. In that year, women only won 2 of the 12 Senate positions (16%) and 25 of the 207 Congressional seats (12%). Women also comprise only 18% of judges in Philippine courts (Ortega, n.d.)

A study on gender discrimination revealed that women managers report being excluded from informal networks, and experiencing difficulties in finding mentors. Male managers also reported that they are given more responsibilities than women in the same position (Lim & Hechanova, 2005). Women in a 1997 Work Orientation Survey also reported less job satisfaction than men. In comparison to male workers, responses by female interviewees revealed less agreement with statements such as work provides them high with income, opportunities for advancement, and allows them to work independently (Hechanova, Uy, & Presbitero 2004). The UNESCO study on women in local government mirrors these findings. Women in local government reported facing discrimination from colleagues and members of the local community (Ortega, n.d.).

Studies of both female corporate and government leaders suggest that the issue is partly a cultural one. A study

that asked corporate leaders to identify characteristics of effective leaders showed that the Filipino manager still has a tendency to perceive successful managers as possessing traits more commonly ascribed to men than to women. The association of the masculine stereotype with successful managers may be one explanation for the under-representation of women in senior management positions. It also suggests that given the stereotypes, women may be perceived to be less qualified and suitable than men for managerial positions thus affecting women's chances for advancement in the management hierarchy. The acceptance of a male model of management also implies that female managers are likely to be assessed based on the extent to which they exhibit stereotypical male characteristics (Lim & Hechanova, 2005).

However, the study also found that each gender seems to favour its own kind with male managers having a more masculine view of management and female managers having a more feminine view. On the positive side, it means that female managers are less likely than male managers to make selection, promotion, and placement decisions against women and may even favour fellow women. Therefore, increasing the number of women in management can facilitate the entry and progress of other women in the management hierarchy. On the other hand, it also means that as long as management remains a male-dominated field, women will continue to have difficulties breaking through the glass ceiling. This is because senior managers have a great

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influence in the recruitment and promotion of lower level managers below them. Since men occupy most senior positions it is likely that they would favour a male candidate over an equally competent female candidate (Lim & Hechanova, 2005).

Although there were no gender differences in the overall perception of gender discrimination, differences were found for specific organisational practices. Female managers perceived that women are penalised harsher for mistakes, are excluded from informal networks, and have a harder time finding a mentor than men (Lim & Hechanova, 2005). These results are validated in a United Nations study among women local government officials. Women in local government were asked about barriers that restrict women from taking on leadership position. They identified the following; the need to balance family and work responsibilities, attitudes that leadership and decision-making are a male domain, a culture where important decisions are made in informal drinking sessions that exclude women from fully participating in decision-making (Ortega, n.d.).

The results are important to women in management because they are key organisational factors that keep the glass ceiling in place. Mentoring is of particular relevance because studies have shown that mentoring relationships are associated with career development and success. Inclusion in informal networks is also an important factor because it is usually in informal interactions where critical information is exchanged (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The difficulties of women in

obtaining a mentor as well as their exclusion from the so called “old boys network” hinders their advancement in the management hierarchy. What is alarming is that male managers are less aware of the difficulties faced by women in these two aspects because these are areas that they have direct control over. Male managers are often tasked with establishing mentoring relationships with younger managers because they hold more senior positions. The same is true with establishing informal networks; men are usually the ones who organise interaction outside of the office in order to foster camaraderie between them. Whether conscious or not, research has shown that male managers tend to favour taking on a male rather than a female protégé and are not inclined to let women in on their informal interactions. What is apparent, therefore, is that despite legislation against discrimination against women, more subtle forms of discrimination still exist.

Not surprisingly, aside from the continued gender segmentation of industries, there is still a discrepancy between the wages received among the two sexes. Based on the earnings of employed men and women in all occupational groups, women’s earnings constitute less than half of men’s earnings - 40% in 1988 and 47% in 1992 (NCRFW, 2004). This is true even in female-dominated industries (Illo, 1997). Gender income differences are greatest in the sales and services sector where women tend to be found in micro and small enterprises as compared to men who are found in bigger firms (NCRFW, 2004).

### **Diaspora of Filipino Women**

The lack of occupational choice for Filipino workers is evident in the fact that the Philippines is one of the biggest exporters of labour to other countries. Seventy percent (70%) of all overseas Filipino workers are women (POEA, 2006). The majority of these women work as nurses, entertainers or household workers. The departure of women, especially those who are mothers, has raised a number of concerns especially with regards to their and their families' quality of life. Indeed, how can these workers achieve work-life balance when their work takes them far away from their families?

The departure of mothers has also raised serious concerns on the impact of the welfare of the children left behind. OFW children do appear to benefit economically. OFW families are more likely to own homes than non-OFW families. Families of migrant workers are also more likely to have major household appliances and access to communication compared to non-migrant workers (Scalibrini Migration Center, 2003).

Beyond the economic rewards, however, migration appears to have changed the family dynamics. How does such reconfiguration affect children? Although children of OFW parents in general appear to do better in school than children of non-migrant workers, the children of migrant mothers appear to do worse academically and socially. This suggests the importance of the mother's presence in the academic performance of children (Scalibrini Migration Center, 2003).

More problematic is the impact of

migrant mothers on the emotional well-being of children. Children of OFWs appear to be more vulnerable to both physical and verbal abuses by adults who care for them. Interestingly, more boys than girls report being belittled and hurt by their surrogate caregivers. In addition, the feeling of being abandoned was more pronounced among children of migrant mothers and those who have both parents abroad. Children of migrant mothers reported feeling lonely, angry, unloved, afraid, worried compared to all other groups of children.

Children of OFWs are not the only ones who experience adverse impacts. The OFWs themselves also experience contract violations that reduce their salaries or subject them to poor working conditions. Just like the children they leave behind, women OFWs are also vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. For example, domestic helpers complain of insufficient food, too much work, little time to rest, prohibition to use the telephone, limited socialisation and baths, verbal abuse from female employers and sexual harassment from male employers (NCRFW, 2004)

### **Initiatives Empowering Filipino Women to Achieve Work-Life Balance**

#### **Gender and Family-Sensitive Policies**

There has been much effort to ensure gender equality in the country at the level of policy and plans. The Philippine government also established the National Commission on the Role of

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Filipino Women (NCRFW) in 1975 and created the Philippine Plan for Gender-responsive Development (1995-2025), a 30-year framework for pursuing full equality and development for women and men.

The government has also put in place gender and family-sensitive policies. For example, in the past five years, the following new laws were enacted: Solo Parents Act which prohibits employers from discriminating against single parents, Paternity Leave Act providing 7 days leave for married men whose spouse has given birth. The revised labour code also contains provisions against sexual harassment, discrimination against any female employee as well as provisions for institutionalised child care in organisations of a certain size.

### Work-Life Initiatives

What bodes well, especially for workers in the formal sector, is that corporations in the Philippines have begun taking their cue from more global organisations and have started to implement work-life programs and services. Work-life balance programs are initiatives adopted by organisations to help workers achieve better quality of work and life. Thus, these initiatives are varied and may be clustered in three general categories; those related to providing; 1) flexibility in time and space, 2) family-related needs, and 3) personal development and well-being.

There are a number of initiatives to increase the flexibility of workers to balance the needs of work and family. These include the following.

- Telecommuting or work at home arrangements

- Special Leave such as family care leave, death of a family member leave, and emergency leave
- Flexitime that allows workers to adjust their work schedules
- Compressed work week where workers spend longer hours in a day but less working days a week
- Job sharing

On the other hand, organisations also tend to categorise family-benefits among work-life balance initiatives. These may include the following.

- Housing loan
- Educational assistance for dependents
- Summer workshops for kids
- Food allowance
- Day care services
- Car loan
- Calamity loan
- Transportation service or allowance
- Salary loan

Finally, the third cluster of work-life balance initiatives seeks to ensure the continued growth and well-being of the individual worker. Among these initiatives are the following.

- Career planning/mentoring
- Career counselling
- Health & wellness programs and facilities
- Educational assistance for employees
- Stress management courses
- Study leave
- Personal interest seminars
- Resource library
- Personal counselling
- Outreach programs
- Family counselling



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- Worship facilities
- Work-related seminars

Cognisant of the stressful nature of its industry, business process outsourcing organisations are at the forefront of providing work-life balance initiatives – from recreation rooms, to gyms and massages. A study conducted by the Personnel Management Association of the Philippines and Resources and Inner Strategies for Excellences, Inc. (RISE) reveals that the most common work-life

support offered by organisations are salary loans, work-related seminars, transportation allowances, car loans, and educational assistance (Cabochan, 2002 in Hechanova, 2005). Interestingly, however, there appears to be a discrepancy between what is provided and what the employee needs (see Table 1). For example, although workers seek day care services for their children, only one company in the survey provided this service.

**Table 1: Work-life Programs Sought and Provides in Philippine Organizations**

Work-Life Programs	% of Employees who seek (n=156)	% of Organizations who provide (n=138)
Housing loan	49	21
Telecommuting	47	4
Career planning/mentoring	42	29
Career counselling	42	22
Educational Assistance to dependents	41	28
Health & Wellness programs	38	35
Summer workshops for kids	36	6
Educational Assistance to Employees	35	51
Food Allowance	35	48
Special Leaves	35	30
Stress Management courses	35	25
Study Leave	34	38
Extended Family Care leaves	33	17
Personal Interest Seminars	32	27
Day Care Services	31	1
Flexitime	31	39

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Resource Library	29	35
Car Loan	28	55
Compressed work week	27	18
Personal counselling	27	25
Outreach programs	26	27
Calamity loan	25	41
Family Counselling	22	9
Transportation service	19	45
Worship facilities	18	41
Salary loan	16	89
Job sharing	15	13
Transfer entitlements	15	25
Transportation allowance	15	67
Work-related seminars	12	85

The government also put in place a programme for civil servants. This programme includes flexi-time that allows workers to freely adjust their work schedule as long as they complete an eight-hour work day. The SWAP programme also allows civil service employees to exchange similar posts with colleagues in other areas so they can work geographically closer to home (NCRFW, 2004).

### Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families

To provide better protection to its overseas workers, the Philippine government initiated bilateral and social welfare agreements with foreign countries who regularly receive its OFWs. In 2002, the Philippine Overseas Employment Authority (POEA) implemented stricter rules for new recruitment agencies and stiffer

penalties for the violation of rules. It has also posted female labour attaches and social workers to countries with large populations of female overseas workers (NCRFW, 2004). NGOs, such as the Scalibrini Migration Center, continue to work towards enhancing knowledge and education of migrant workers and their families.

### Empowering the Informal Sector

The most common problems faced by workers in informal sectors are access to credit, lack of employable skills and absence of social protection. Both NGOs and GOs have sought to address these issues through micro-financing initiatives and capability-building programmes. One example is the labour department's Women Workers Employment and Entrepreneurship Development (WEED) Programme

which has trained about 22,980 women in the period 2001 to 2003. To provide more social protection to informal sector workers, the Revised SSS Act has legally extended SSS to self-employed workers. However, implementation of the law has been hindered by difficulties in remittance of premiums (NCRFW, 2004).

Another common problem of informal workers is access to child care. To address this, the Philippine government in 1990 mandated the establishment of a day care centre in every village. The social welfare department has also built about 37,422 preschools all over the country. Although there is criticism that the day care centres allow only little time-off for women with young children to undertake gainful employment, it still frees up some time for women for income generation (NCRFW, 2004).

More than half of women in rural areas labour in their family farms without pay. Rural women share the same problems as informal sector workers in cities and towns. However, their issues are magnified by their location. In addition, their role as producers are often overlooked because generally men are considered as farmers, fishers or livestock raisers and are given more access to natural resources. For example, in 1992 only 12% of recipients of land patents were women. To address this, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was instituted and included gender equality provisions such as the issuing of certificates in the names of both spouses. By 2001, women received 33% of land certificates awarded (NCRFW, 2004).

## **Continuing Issues and Challenges to Work-Life Balance**

The past decade has seen many notable improvements in the plight of women workers in the Philippines. The gains, however, are still fragile and there are still many remaining issues that will impact on both the quality of work and life of women workers.

### **Improving Participation of Women in Leadership**

Key to ensuring the policies and programmes are gender sensitive is ensuring that women are represented in leadership positions and are part of policy development. As noted earlier, women are still under-represented in top leadership positions. How can women workers break through such glass ceilings? Employers need to be made aware of such a culture and make a commitment to promoting a culture of fairness and equity. Employers need to ensure that human resource and development systems promote and protect women workers. Recruitment and the provision of mentoring for women leaders are other important mechanisms.

### **Culture change in the Filipino Family**

However, equity in the workplace will only be possible if there is also equity in the family. As long as Filipina women continue to bear the lion's share of household responsibilities, their ability to take on greater responsibility in the

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workplace will be greatly hampered. To this end, education and culture change of both wives and husbands are important. Empowered wives need enlightened husbands. Child-rearing and socialisation practices also need to be re-examined to break the stereotypes of gender roles.

### **Monitoring and Implementation of Gender and Family-Friendly Policies**

There have been a number of laws enacted to protect Filipina women both in the formal, informal and overseas work environments. Unfortunately, many of these laws have yet to be fully enforced or monitored. For example, the country implemented its Anti-Sexual Harassment Act in 1990. Yet from 1994 to 2000, the implementing Civil Service Commission received only 38 complaints. Of these, 15 respondents were dismissed from service, 7 were suspended for a period ranging from 3 months up to a year, and 2 were acquitted. The rest were dismissed for various reasons such as lack of evidence and desistance of complainant (NCRFW, 2004). The implementation of other family-friendly laws, such as the provision of day care, remains questionable. In addition, some of these Philippine laws are still a far cry from the family friendly policies of the more developed countries. For example, women who give birth are provided 60 days maternity leave for normal delivery and 78 for a caesarean delivery. In European countries, mothers are assured

a minimum of 14 weeks of paid maternity leave while other countries such as Bulgaria provide as much as 36 weeks (Bolgar, 2001).

### **Support Services for Migrant Workers and their Families**

Although there are programmes that target families of migrant workers, the studies suggest there is greater need for psychological programmes directed at protecting migrant families from the difficulties associated with the separation of child and parents. Counselling and parenting programs may be particularly important in empowering both migrant workers and the spouses left behind. Protection especially of women migrant workers is still a concern and needs to be pursued more vigorously.

### **Improving Access to Resources and Education**

A critical issue, especially for workers in the informal sector, is the lack of access to resources and education to allow them to earn a living. Despite the high literacy rate in the country, unemployment is high, especially among women. This suggests a gap in the nature of education that Filipinos receive and which is required by employers. The issue of choice is useless if workers do not have the skills required to compete for jobs and positions. Bridging competence gaps by providing workers with greater access to resources and education is still vital to providing greater choice.

## **Improving Job Creation and Productivity**

Finally, the issue of choice assumes that there are adequate employment opportunities for the workforce. The high rate of labour migration is testimony to this dearth. Even the high growth rate of the business process outsourcing and call centre industries is not expected to provide a solution to the country's unemployment problem. This is because only about 4% of applicants are selected and many are university graduates with good English for whom a call centre job is a form of under-employment. Thus, to increase occupational choice of workers the expansion of other industries is vital. For example, the service sector is the fastest growing industry in Asia. Services such as tourism and travel, retailing and distribution, education and health are all sectors where a relatively large number of jobs can be created. Women in rural areas also remain the most vulnerable to poverty. Therefore, improving rural infrastructure, transportation, electrification and agricultural technologies are critical to improving agricultural productivity, reducing poverty reduction and providing workers greater quality of life (NCRFW, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

I would like to end with some interesting facts. A 2005 World values survey showed that Filipinos, in general, place more importance on work than on leisure or recreation. 82 percent of respondents to the World Values Survey agreed that work should always come

first even if it means less spare time. Attitudes towards leisure, however, appear to be influenced by income levels. The World Values Survey reveals that workers with higher incomes place a higher value on leisure than those with less education and income. The higher the income, the more likely they are to have discretionary funds for leisure. In a country where more than one-third or a total of 26.5 million Filipinos fall below the poverty line (National Statistics Coordination Board 2002), the results do suggest that for lower-income workers, survival takes priority over leisure (Hechanova, Uy, & Presbitero, 2005).

To conclude, initiatives to help workers achieve greater work-life balance are already beginning to take root in the formal sector. It appears that at least for educated women in rural areas, work-life balance may be within their reach because of increased choices and flexibility. However, for the Filipino workers who are in lower level jobs, the informal sector or overseas, work-life balance may just be a far flung dream. For these workers, the more pressing concern may not even be work-life balance but may be more fundamental - finding decent work to provide a decent life.

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# Rural Women's Participation in Politics in Village-level Elections in China

*Liu Lige*

## Abstract

Political rights are important rights for women. The improvement of women's participation in politics is significant yet there are more opportunities to promote women's development, to safeguard women's rights and interests, and to achieve gender equality. Along with economic and social developments, more and more women participate in the management of national and social affairs, particularly with regards to matters that affect women. Nevertheless, due to historical, economic, and cultural reasons women's participation, along with discussions on governmental and political affairs, remain at a lower level in China than in most other developing countries. This is especially the case in rural areas where women form large parts of the population but show low levels of political participation. In light of this situation, the Shaanxi Women's Federation in the 6<sup>th</sup> village-level election in 2005 gave greater importance to promoting rural women's participation in elections and politics with the aim of raising the proportion of women represented in Villager Committees.

After great efforts by all parties, the proportion of rural women has been markedly enhanced. This paper analyses the full course of the election. It will also discuss the significance of rural women's participation in elections and politics while also looking at necessary policies and measures to further promote rural women's participation in politics.

## I. Brief Summary of Women's Participation in Elections and Politics in the 6<sup>th</sup> Village-level election in Shaanxi Province in 2005

In 2005, Shaanxi Province conducted the 6<sup>th</sup> village-level election. The Women's Federation in Shaanxi attached great importance to enhancing women's participation. The analysis of the process from pre- to post-election reveals a number of important lessons for the next elections. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>

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village-level election revealed problems concerning women's participation in elections and politics. After the 4<sup>th</sup> village-level election in 1998, there were 11,279 committee women in 32,332 administrative villages in Shaanxi Province, presenting 10% of the total, of which 179 were women directors (0.7% of the total number). After the 5<sup>th</sup> village-level election in 2001, there were 11,061 committee women in 28,991 administrative villages in the province, accounting for 9% of the total, of which 184 were women directors (0.6% of the total). The comparison between the results of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> election suggests that the proportion of women's participation is in decline as the portion of participation was lower than the average national level during the same period.

In response to this situation, women's federations at all levels were seeking to address this deficit by arranging campaign affairs and focusing on the implementation of their strategies. All women's federations were involved in structuring election organising committees and to clarify the responsibilities for the potential candidates in the 6<sup>th</sup> village-level election. The organising committee within the provincial women's federation and the civil affairs office of the province jointly issued orders, proposing detailed indices and requirements for women's participation in the elections. The provincial women's federation set up 4 demonstrative counties in Guanzhong Region, South Shaanxi and North Shaanxi, and launched the "Demonstrative Project to Elevate Women Proportion in Village

Committee in Rural Areas in Heyang County". All women's federations took action simultaneously. The campaign focused on the important role of women in the economic and social development of the countryside. The electorate received posters and leaflets while also being informed through the medium of theatre that made its rounds through villages and towns. By promoting the significance of women's participation in elections and politics a consensus for enhanced participation emerged. The committee also visited the countryside to launch surveys, to introduce candidates, and to hold training sessions for women leaders to boost women's abilities in their participation in elections and politics. Their efforts paid off in the 6<sup>th</sup> village-level election in which women's participation was greatly improved. In this election, 12,337 committeewomen were elected, accounting for 13.35% (a rise of 1.79% compared to the previous election); 272 women directors were elected, taking up 1.01% of the total, and up from 0.41%. Among the 107 counties and cities (districts) in the province, 43 areas elected more than three female directors. Among them is Heyang County which elected 20 women directors, representing 5.69% of the total number.

## **II. Significance for Rural Women to Participate in Villager Committee Elections**

### **(1) First of all, participation of rural women in Villager Committee elections helps to promote economic and social development in the countryside.**

With the adjustment in rural industrial structure and fastened steps in transferring surplus labour from the countryside to cities, more and more men leave their hometowns to find work elsewhere. Therefore, women are the main labour force in agricultural production and play a significant role in the economic and social development of the countryside. In 1990, women comprised 52.4% of the labour force in rural areas and this figure rose to 61.6% in 2000. Women's participation in politics as well as in the management of village affairs can be a boost to the economic and social development in the countryside.

### **(2) Secondly, it benefits the strengthening and perfection of rural democratic politics.**

The village committee is the primary mass organisation of self-governance in which villagers manage their own affairs and in which elections are conducted, decisions adopted, administration maintained, and supervision exercised by democratic means. Women's

participation in village committee elections is a basic political right provided through the law. It is proven in practice that village autonomy is unsound without the participation of women. Village autonomy cannot be realised without the care, participation and support of women in rural areas.

### **(3) Thirdly, it can maintain benefits of women groups**

Due to differences in physiological structure, social division, educational status and position, women differ in thought pattern, focus and pursuit. Women's participation in village committee elections and the management of village affairs can bring different viewpoints for the construction of village committees. It can also help put forward issues that are for the benefit of women such as the protection of women's rights in land contracts, or the protection of women in the family.

### **(4) Fourth, the election benefits the development of individual women**

For a long time, women rarely participated in social affairs and as a result had limited experiences in this field. Village committee elections provide a stage for women to assert themselves. Through participation in these elections, women can enrich their experiences in political involvement and boost their abilities in participating and discussing political affairs. Meanwhile, with greater insights and abilities obtained through the participation in village committee

elections, they can better maintain their rights and interests and improve their status both in society at large and in their own families.

### III. Opportunities and Advantages for Women to Participate in Villager Committee Elections

#### (1) Legal Regulations

The constitution of the People's Republic of China states that "*all citizens of the People's Republic of China who have reached the age of 18 have the right to vote and stand for election, regardless of ethnic status, race, sex, occupation, family background, religious belief, education, property status or length of residence,*" and "*women enjoy the same rights as men in politics, economy, culture, society and family life.*" Organic Law of the Villager Committees states that "*The members of a Villager Committee shall include an appropriate number of women.*" Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women states that "*the state shall guarantee that women enjoy equal political rights with men,*" "*women have the right to conduct state affairs, manage economic and cultural undertakings and administer social affairs through various channels and in various ways,*" "*women shall enjoy the equal right with men to vote and to stand for election and there shall be an appropriate number of women deputies in residents committees and Villager Committees*". All these provisions provide evidence for women in rural area to participate in election

and politics and to manage social affairs in the countryside.

#### (2) Policies

**(a) State policy:** The Outline for the Development of Chinese Women states that "*There shall be an appropriate proportion of women deputies in residents' committees and Villager Committees*". It is necessary to constitute perfect regulations and policies for women to equally participate in decisions and management, and to encourage and guide women to actively participate in competitions. In 2002, the General Office of the State Council and the General Office of the Central Government issued the "Notice on Further Conducting Villagers-Committee Election", stipulating that "*We should guarantee women's legal rights in villagers-committee election and maintain appropriate women members in Villager Committee.*" The Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, in view of the decline in women members elected to Villager Committees in rural areas, has proposed detailed counter-measures in "Opinions on Guaranteeing Appropriate Women Members in Villager Committees in Rural Areas".

**(b) Policy of Shaanxi Province:** The General Office of the Provincial Committee of CPC and the General Office of the Provincial Government have issued the "Notice on Conducting the 6<sup>th</sup> Villager Committee Election in Shaanxi Province", requiring that "*Effective measures should be taken to guarantee women's proper rights in the*

*election and to strive for more women members to be elected in Villager Committees".* A number of detailed policy stipulations have forwarded measures to promote rural women's participation in elections and politics.

### **(3) Upgrade of the Social Status of Women**

With the economic and social development in the countryside, women have higher education levels. The Women's Federation launched the "Double Learning and Double Comparison" strategy and established women's schools, which have greatly boosted the confidence of rural women. There is no major difference in the education between boys and girls. Schoolgirls in senior middle school amount to 47.1% of the total number of students. Second, Women often exhibit outstanding wisdom and talents in economic development and the management of social affairs. In new economic organisations in the countryside, women take up a good number. According to surveys launched by the Policy Research Office of Shaanxi Provincial Committee and the Women's Federation of Shaanxi Province in Jintai District, Qianyang, Fengxiang and Meixian County of Baoji City, rural economic cooperative organisations that are dominated by women experience rapid development. There are 585 economic organisations which have been initiated by women or are dominated by women, accounting for 65% of all economic organisations in the countryside. Women represent 57% of the members of these organisations.

Women economic leaders appear like bamboo shoots after the spring rain and they have contributed much to the economic and social development in the countryside.

### **(4) The Influence of Women Village Leaders**

After the launch of democratic elections, women have gained greater access to equal competition and with the support from villagers many have entered the committees while some have even entered higher ranking positions. There are two prominent features for women's participation in politics, namely hard work and clean politics which are welcome by the electorate. One example are the achievements of Liu Huilian, secretary of the party committee in Tongtifang Village, Ganjing Town, Heyang County. Through various innovative measures she managed to increase per capita income of the village from RMB 650 Yuan to RMB 1400 Yuan in three years of her duty. Shijiayuan Village Huoshaodian Town, Liuba County also has a female Secretary of Party Committee and a female director. After they took office in 2003, they took various measures that greatly increased the income of the villagers. Though there are fewer female than male village leaders in the province, they are brave enough to grasp opportunities and to confront challenges. Through this they have also helped to conquer prevailing prejudices regarding women's participation in politics.

## **IV. Difficulties and Challenges Women Have Faced in Participation in Villager Committee Election**

### **(1) Organisation of Village Autonomy**

The Villager Committee is part of the organisation of village autonomy. Its members are elected by voting according to stipulations of Organic Law of the Villager Committees. Therefore, the election of village committees can only be generated by advocacy and guidance. Otherwise it will violate the stipulation of the law. To some extent, direct election by villagers has more requirements for women and brings about new challenges.

### **(2) Functional Conversion of Villager Committee**

Previously, village leaders had the main task of collecting grain and money while also playing a role in implementing the government's family planning policy. Since 2005, China has exempted agricultural tax and family planning policies have gradually moved towards standardisation. Now, work in countryside is less difficult and offends less people. Therefore, more people are willing to work in the countryside and the competition for such jobs is severe. This has led to more challenges for women who previously had fewer opportunities to participate in politics.

### **(3) Influence of Traditional Thought and Concept**

13 dynasties chose their capitals in Shaanxi Province, due to the deep-rooted traditional feudal thoughts and concepts in the whole province. The problem is more serious in the Guanzhong Region. Though this region enjoys a favourable geographical location and is more developed than other regions in the province, Confucian ideology and culture, such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" women in the feudal society had to abide by, have amassed to such an extent that it has long been the political and cultural centre of feudal governments. Therefore, feudal thoughts and concepts, such as "men superior, women inferior", "men dominating, women dominated", have given rise to unfavourable attitudes amongst villagers against women's participation in politics. A considerable number of people take it for granted that a woman is born to cook meals, wash clothes, and look after the children and that only a man can become a village leader as political affairs are seen to be none of a women's business. Furthermore, the common practice of women living in the family of their husbands after marriage makes it more difficult for them to gain recognition and wide support from villagers, thus furthering the disadvantaged position of women in elections.

### **(4) Gender Divisions in Labour and Prejudice**

In the opinion of a number of people, it is only natural that men should work outside the home while women take

care of domestic matters. These people also believe that men are responsible for earning money to support a family, thus enjoying power to make decisions in public affairs and playing the dominant role. Women are expected to look after family matters and to be cared for and dominated by their husbands. This role affects women's participation in social activities, and results in the fact that most decisions are taken by men. This has an immediate effect on the election of Villager Committees. Although many villagers know that women have the right to vote and to stand for election, it is widely accepted that the men as the masters of the house have the right to vote on behalf of their wives thus depriving them of their political rights.

### **(5) Women's Lack of Self-confidence**

Due to limited opportunities and lack of resources available to women they seldom have the opportunity to participate in politics which results in their lack of experience and negatively affects the cultivation of their decision-making capabilities. Therefore, a great number of women are not willing to take part in Villager Committee elections. Given the power of traditional thinking, a few women feel inferior. Due to additional factors, such as family pressure, lack of support from their fathers- and mothers-in-law, heavy family burden, or prejudices from villagers, they are unwilling to demonstrate their own talents. According to statistics, over 60% of men are willing to assume leading positions, but only few women are willing do the same. Even those women

who are involved in politics often underestimate their own capabilities and willingly take assistant positions or play supporting roles while believing that it is common for men to make decisions.

## **V. Role of Women's Federations in Driving the Participation of Rural Women in Elections and Politics**

Women's Federations represent and conserve women's benefits and play an irreplaceable role in driving rural women's participation in elections and politics. During the election of the sixth Villager Committee, women's federations at all levels did the following work.

### **(1) To Draw Lessons from Beneficial Experience**

The Ministry of Civil Affairs, many local governments and women's federations have done much pioneering work for the purpose of driving women's participation in elections and politics, a lot of which proved successful. This work provides referential experience and practice for Shaanxi Province to increase the proportion of elected women in Villager Committees. In 2003, the Ministry of Civil Affairs commenced, in Tanggu District, Tianjin the "Innovative Demonstration Project for Raising the Proportion of Elected Rural Women in Villager Committee". It also circulated the "Opinion on Ensuring Appropriate Portion of

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Women Members in the Election of Villager Committee”, and organised training to current and reserve female village leaders and women representatives prior to the election of Villager Committee. After the election, there were 32 women members in the 34 Villager Committees, making up 28.3% of the total number.

In order to ensure women's participation in Villager Committees, Hunan Province, in “Election Means for Villager Committee of Hunan Province” approved by the People's Congress of Hunan Province, explicitly regulated “*there is at least one woman member in a Villager Committee*”, and formulated a series of concrete measures for achieving the above objective. For example, large-scale training for village leaders and female members was conducted. In the fifth election of the Villager Committee of Hunan Province, there were 49,903 female committee members in the 47,471 Villager Committees across the province, women taking up 29.3% of the total number and on average 1.05 female members in each village.

Prior to the election, Women's Federation of Shaanxi Province organised related party government leaders, leaders of women's federations and rural women in the province to study in the aforesaid regions, accumulating experiences for promoting women's participation in the election of Villager Committee.

### **(2) To Conduct Campaign Promotion**

Shannxi Women's Federation printed 15,000 sets of promotional pictures and

distributed them to every county, township and village. The Federation made great efforts to promote gender equality by means of radio and television programmes, newspaper articles, and blackboard notices. It also circulated promotion handbooks, pictures and leaflets, and organised mass culture activities so as to popularise the idea that women play a indispensable role in managing village-level civil affairs and to create a sound social atmosphere for rural women to participate in elections and politics.

### **(3) To Conduct In-depth Investigation**

Through investigation and interviews, women's federations have managed to paint a clearer picture as regards the actual situation of local female leaders in Villager Committees and the experiences and thoughts of rural women in general. They have also identified a large number of well-educated and capable women who are willing to work hard for the benefit of the people.

### **(4) To Carry out Education and Training**

The Women's Federation in Shaanxi Province initiated training courses in order to educate women in Hanzhong, Ankang, Xianyang, and Weinan. More than 2,000 women have undergone such training. The main content of the training courses includes information on the significance and advantage of women's participation in elections, the analysis on the possibilities and feasibility of women's participation, the



basic qualifications required for participation, and the preparation for election itself.

According to statistics, women's federations in Shaanxi Province have altogether launched 1,425 training courses of different varieties, preparing more than 38,000 women for their engagement in civil affairs, at the grass roots and in the villages.

### **(5) To Focus on Key Points and To Give Consideration to General Developments**

Since 2004, the Shaanxi Women's Federation and the Shaanxi Women's Research Society have carried on the "Demonstration Project for Raising the Proportion of the Elected Rural Women in the Election of Villager Committee" in Heyang. They have carried out investigation at the grass roots level, compiled training textbooks, printed promotional pictures, and arranged promotion programmes. They have also co-drafted "Means for Expiration Election" together with related departments for the purpose of facilitating the election of women. Women's federations at 10 municipalities have also set up demonstrative units at different levels, such as county, township, and villages, forming a network of experimental units, thus playing a driving role.

## **VI. Issues Requiring Attention and Solutions.**

The 6<sup>th</sup> village-level election of Shaanxi Province has made a number of achievements in facilitating women's

participation in politics. The proportion of elected women has been higher compared to the last two elections. Some problems, however, have emerged during these elections and should be given due consideration to allow for corrective measures to be taken.

### **(1) Insufficient Understanding**

The election of Villager Committees is integral element of the rights of rural communities and it is also one of the issues that receive the greatest attention from farmers. Therefore, the issues surrounding elections should be understood in a comprehensive manner, thus the interests of different groups need to taken into consideration. Nonetheless, both rural leaders at the grass roots level and farmers sometimes lack democratic consciousness. The problem is mainly evident in two aspects; first, farmers as well as their leaders are unfamiliar with democratic principles at the grass roots, which may lead to incidents that impinge on the democratic rights of farmers. Second, a considerable number of farmers feel that it is irrelevant whether or not women are part of the Villager Committee. Only insufficient efforts have been made to address this problem. As some farmers think that women if elected are unable to take on the required responsibilities and burdens, they chose not to support women in the elections.

### **(2) Misunderstandings**

The "Organic Law of the Villager Committees of the People's Republic of China" and the "Law of the People's

Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women” both stipulate explicitly that “*an appropriate portion of women is required in Villager Committees*”. Nevertheless, as to the interpretation of the word “appropriate”, some regions and departments believe that it is merely a concept in the whole range of one region, and it is already “appropriate” to have several female leaders in certain region. However, legal workers think that it can only be considered “appropriate” if it is ensured that at least one woman is part of each Villager Committee; if this is not the case, the legal regulations are just empty talk. The discrepancy between the interpretations of some departments and leaders affects the progress of this work.

### (3) Long-term Neglect

Based on the training of rural women, we can see that there are many women who are enthusiastic about and capable of participating in politics. However, the problem is that training has only started recently and women for a long time had no platform to study, communicate and practice. There have been only few training programs for rural leaders in general and women have hardly been taken into consideration. In the previous elections, women's participation in elections and politics was given little consideration.

### (4) Great Challenges

Women's participation in elections and politics is a task that requires long-term and perseverant efforts. It is also a task that demands continuous efforts by

committees of the Party and governments at all levels and should not be seen as completed in a certain period. Prior to the election, there should be organisations and institutions responsible for the task in question, including corresponding policies and documents as well as concrete measures. Meanwhile, demonstrative units should be set up at all levels, advancing the task level upon level and layer by layer. Women's federations at all levels should actively carry out promotion and training prior to elections, so as to improve women's self-confidence, and to create an atmosphere that is favourable to women's participation in politics. With the help of specific measures, the proportion of women participating in elections and politics may be raised continuously.

### (5) Sustainable Measures

For the purpose of ensuring the implementation of the regulation that “*an appropriate portion of women is required in the Villager Committee*” as stipulated by the “Organic Law of the Villager Committees of the People's Republic of China”, the committees of the Party and governments in the region where elections of Villager Committee are held should make great efforts to popularise the thought and concept of gender equality and the irreplaceable role of women in managing village-level civil affairs.

- (1) Guide villagers' conferences and villager groups to include qualified female villagers when villagers vote for Villager Committee;
- (2) Instruct villagers to nominate qualified female villagers when

villagers directly nominate candidates to the Villager Committee, and at the same time, encourage rural women to break through the restrictions of feudal ideology and worldly prejudices to have the courage to bear heavy responsibility and to challenge competition;

- (3) Guide villagers' electoral committees to actively give presentations concerning the achievements of female candidates by introducing candidates, and to care nothing for any prejudice and unfair treatment.
- (4) Organise, educate and guide the majority of villagers, especially female villagers, to exercise their due democratic rights in voting, for the purpose of selecting the competent female candidates that are willing to serve the majority and are supported by most villagers into the Villager Committee.

## (6) Necessary Tasks

As far as the newly-elected female members of the Villager Committee are concerned, we should help them to get familiar with their new posts as well as provide guidance at least in the initial stages. It is important to continuously strengthen the training for these elected female members in rural areas, to help to improve their competence and to cement the results of the election. Governments, departments of civil affairs and women's federations at all levels should try in different ways to train these newly-elected female Villager Committee members, and to carry out training courses on methods and techniques with regard to the management of village affairs and decision-making so as to allow female leaders to quickly adapt to the requirements of rural affairs. The second task is to help those female leaders that sincerely serve villagers during their term in office to be re-elected.

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# Status of Women in Singapore and Trends in Southeast Asia

*Braema Mathiapparanam*

Women in South East Asian countries function primarily at two levels – the reproductive and the productive level. They give birth, they nurture, they manage child-care and in some instances elder-care and also work in the field, factories or offices. The tension of managing both their productive roles as salaried workers and their reproductive roles as nurturers and care-givers is not a new trend or phenomenon. Since the 1960s, feminist issues of child-care support, flexible work patterns, and work-life balance have been political and can make or break a leadership.

In Southeast Asia such provisions to support women's reproductive roles as they manage their productive ones, remain a challenge. Women in Southeast Asia still have limited access to education and the majority of the population is rurally located. Poverty is severe. Access to proper sanitation and clean water remain challenges at the local level for people in certain parts of Southeast Asia such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. Nevertheless, compared to 40 years ago there is progress for women as access to education and health care has increased in spite of the lack of resources.

Given this scenario it is not surprising that the majority of women are still too pre-occupied with the daily running of their lives at home and at the workplace (whether it be rural or urban) to be directly involved in politics. In addition, prevailing cultural norms still state that politics is the domain of men who make decisions. And finally, as economic development still poses the main challenge for many Southeast Asian countries, entering politics, rightly or wrongly, is often seen as a luxury.

This discussion is divided into four parts; the first part discusses the possibility of developing women as leaders; the second part will highlight historical and traditional norms that still influence participation trends; the third part discusses efforts made to have more women as decision-makers and the limitations to that process. Lastly, I also make a few recommendations on how we can improve the situation.

## **Development of Women**

A review of the Human Development Index (HDI) shows that most of ASEAN countries are ranked 'Medium' as

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regards progress with Singapore and Brunei Darussalam as exceptions at the High end<sup>1</sup>. These indices and the ranking of ASEAN countries highlight the progress made – namely, greater access to education, increases in life expectancy and improved Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR).<sup>2</sup>

But the HDI can only tell half the story. To look at women's or for that matter men's progress one needs to look at the details through gender-disaggregated data. For example, looking at adult literacy figures alone indicates the level to which ASEAN countries are overlooking their women as a source of human talents. The trend in literacy favours men – women trail behind men with a difference of between 2.9

percentage points and 21.8 percentage points in literacy with the exception of the Philippines where men trail behind women by a 1.4 percentage point difference<sup>3</sup>. This is a sheer waste of human resources where the potential of women's productive work is concerned. It can also mean that women tend to occupy the lower strata in workforce if their educational and literacy levels remain low and uncompetitive. Women also fall behind men in other fields such as access to healthcare and employment. They also have lower wages and seemingly longer working hours. Few hold leadership positions in the workforce (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Selected Indicators for female economic, professional and political participation<sup>4</sup>**

Countries	Labour Force Participation Rate (aged 15-64)		Seats in Parliament held by Women (%)	Female Legislators, Senior Management (%)	Female Professionals and Technical Workers (%)
	Male	Female			
Brunei Darussalam	84.2	49.4	-	-	-
Cambodia	82.3	76.2	10.9	14	33
Indonesia	86.3	53.2	8.0	-	-
Lao PDR	91.1	77.4	22.9	-	-
Malaysia	35.7	39.4	16.3	20	45
Myanmar	89.7	68.3	-	-	-
Philippines	84.7	54.8	17.2	58	62

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Singapore	82.7	56.3	16.0	26	43
Thailand	81.1	65.0	10.6	27	55
Vietnam	86.0	79.4	27.3	-	-

In addition, women suffer from limited access to land, credit and Information Technology. Furthermore, women, especially rural women and poor urban women, remain most vulnerable to abuse, violence, illnesses, and diseases.

A useful indicator to gauge women's progress is to look at the Gender Development Indices within ASEAN. The data shows starker disparities in the development of women across the ASEAN countries. (See Table 3)<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3: Gender Related Development Index<sup>6</sup> (score of 1 is highest)**

Ranking of Countries	Country	GDI
51	Malaysia	0.795
58	Thailand	0.781
66	Philippines	0.761
80	Vietnam	0.708
81	Indonesia	0.704
97	Cambodia	0.578
-	Myanmar	0.555
100	Laos	0.545
--	Singapore	--
--	Brunei	--

The Gender Empowerment Measurement, which measures the level

of women in decision-making, is also a good indicator for the level of women who function as decision-makers in the public sector. The GEM reveals poor showing of women in top positions even in more developed ASEAN member countries such as Singapore and Malaysia<sup>7</sup> while there are more women in Parliament in some of the less developed countries. For example, in Laos PDR women representation in Parliament is 22.9 percent while the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have up to 19 percent women representatives in Parliament.<sup>8</sup> Though recent statistics show more women representation in Parliament, the figures are still below the threshold of 30 percent. This figure is cited as the threshold needed for any impact to be made at policy level and results from recommendations made as part of the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995 that ASEAN countries adopted.

It is crucial for women to hold executive positions and to be in top management positions so that they can influence change and be part of the process of making decisions for the people. A recent survey by business consultant Grant Thornton showed the percentage of women holding top positions in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Top positions refer to women being in senior management or the top.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 4: Percentage of women holding top positions in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries**

PHILIPPINES	50 %
THAILAND	39 %
HONG KONG	35 %
CHINA	32 %
TAIWAN	29 %
MALAYSIA	23 %
SINGAPORE	21 %
JAPAN	7 %

Therefore, gaps between men and women still exist even if the gap is being narrowed in some areas. And two forces – globalisation and migration of labour – may still derail the efforts within ASEAN to make further improvements towards closing the gender gap.

### Reasons for this Gap: The Past

South East Asian history reveals deep-seated patriarchal attitudes. Here are some examples.

- Thailand during the Ayudha era in 1361 passed a law on husbands and wives stating that men are allowed to practice polygamy and wives are to be categorised into various classes. This practice continued into the Rattanakosin era for another two centuries. In 1804 – Laws of the Three Seals – upheld the practice of polygamy with new status for women in marriage – major wife, minor wife, slave wife. It was not till the era of King Rama IV in 1900s that

forcing women to become wives was finally prohibited. King Rama IV also bestowed upon his wife the role of Regent to set her up as a role model for other women. His son, King Rama VI, continued with the tradition. After World War Two Thailand took on a more international approach which also influenced the decision to enhance equality between men and women by law.<sup>10</sup>

- In Vietnam, Confucian ethics was entrenched through the feudal system that placed, for example, having a son for lineage as all-important. Even the peasant uprising of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French occupation into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later the Indochinese Communist Party were all patriarchal set-ups. The Communist Party ensured that women were included in the workforce by creating opportunities for them to work in industries but neglected to persuade men to play a greater role in the home. The 1946 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam finally established the principle of equality.<sup>11</sup>
- Singapore and Malaysia with a common history of being colonised also considered polygamy as a legitimate way of life. It was during the early 1950s that women's groups lobbied for the removal of polygamy and greater constitutional rights. In Singapore, many women voted for the current ruling party, the People's Action Party, as a result of the revision to amend the law to make polygamy illegal.<sup>12</sup>



## Political Systems

In the past three to four decades many countries in Southeast Asia – Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Laos PDR, Vietnam and East Timor – were all involved in independence struggles and democracy movements. Thailand moved from military dictatorship to a functioning democracy – at least until the recent set-backs. This region has also seen its fair share of dictatorships and autocratic leaders. Examples include President

Marcos of the Philippines, Cambodia’s Pol Pot regime and the one-party dictatorship of the Communist Party, President Suharto in Indonesia, Malaysia’s Mahatir Mohammad, and Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew. Under such systems the space for civil society, access to information, political freedom are all limited.

Interestingly, there is also a direct co-relation between the process of democratisation and the level of representation of women in public office.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 5: Political representation of women in Southeast Asian countries according to levels of democratisation**

Level of democracy of Southeast Asian countries	Level of female representation in legislature (latest election)
<i>No elected legislature</i>	
Burma (Myanmar)	NA
Brunei	NA
<i>Communist one-party regimes</i>	
Vietnam	27.3
Laos	25.2
<i>Illiberal democracies – restrictions on opposition</i>	
Cambodia	9.8
Singapore	21.2 <sup>14</sup>
Malaysia	9.1
<i>Liberal democracies – liberal political freedoms</i>	
Thailand (up to Sept. 2006)	10.6
East Timor (Timor Leste)	25.3
Indonesia	11.3
Philippines	15.7

Source: ‘Women in National Parliaments’ (2006).<sup>15</sup>

Because of the demands resulting from the “Beijing Platform for Action” where countries agreed to target a 30 percent representation of women in Parliament for threshold impact, many countries in Southeast Asia have made an effort. In Vietnam, female members of the National Assembly make up 27.9 percent and they represent 23.8 percent of provincial People Committee members, 22.94 percent at district level and 20.10 percent at commune level. In Laos, women representation is 25.2 percent while the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have female representatives of up to 19 percent.

What must also be noted is that women’s representation in political life is most often seen as centred on just political office. It is equally important to look at the representation of women at the grassroots level. In Vietnam, for example, there are very few women at the local government level and, in fact, there are only 8 percent women at the local community council level. In the Philippines, for example, the grassroots movement of women is very strong.

### **Initiatives at ASEAN level**

The first meeting tasked with looking into women’s issues was held in Jakarta in 1981. Each country agreed to set up a Clearing House to document, analyse, and disseminate data and to appoint a national agency as a focal point on matters related to women.

Then in 1988, ASEAN countries went one step further and signed the “Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN region” covering areas such as the right to vote (except for Brunei which was a monarchy);

access to political participation; access to positions in management, judiciary, and the diplomatic corps; recognition for both formal and informal work; access to health, education; development for women through National Programmes and legislation to protect abused women.<sup>16</sup> Women’s Rights issues also featured both in the “Hanoi Plan of Action” (1998) and the “Vientiane Action Plan” (2004). In 2004, all 10 countries signed the “Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in ASEAN Region” and the “Declaration Against Trafficking of Women and Children” was also adopted. COMMIT (Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative), a multi-stakeholder network to combat trafficking became an Action Plan for Greater Mekong sub-region countries. There is also an “ASEAN Regional Programme on Women and Skills Training”, formed in 2000. Other Action Plans – on HIV and Aids, on Transnational Crime, on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication – all pursue approaches that will improve the conditions for men and women within ASEAN.

Today the ASEAN Committees of Women (ACW) comprising Ministers or government representatives, act as focal points in each country while the ASEAN Confederation of Women’s Organisations (ACWO), brings together civil society actors in the ASEAN region.<sup>17</sup> There are also multi-lateral agreements and bilateral agreements between ASEAN and other agencies to improve the status of women in ASEAN. ASEAN countries also adopted the “Beijing Platform of Action” and most

have ratified the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” (CEDAW) and the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (CRC). Some countries in ASEAN have even gone a step further to become signatories of the Optional Protocol on CEDAW.

## **Challenges**

There is progress to get more women into decision-making roles but emerging trends pose their own challenges that detract attention or in some instances can even derail efforts to get more women to take greater public ownership. I highlight a few here.

- **Religion and Women’s Position –** Southeast Asian countries have all ratified CEDAW which is an International Bill of Rights for women. How religious laws function to ensure that women’s rights are not violated is one of the pressing challenges facing countries. In Southeast Asia, however, religion speaks with many voices and there are liberal trends too in how religion can offer more support for women in political life.
- **Rise in HIV infections among women.** Statistics (2005) show that almost 1.4 million people in the Southeast Asian nations of Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos are HIV positive. Of this group 474,000 are women and these numbers are growing<sup>18</sup>. Access to medication and knowledge are limited. Gender-sensitive policies have all contributed to the rise of infections and at state level have limited efforts to stop the spread of the disease.

- **Feminisation of migration –** By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than two million women were estimated to be working in the region, accounting for one third of the entire migrant population<sup>19</sup>. Most female migrants are engaged in reproductive occupations such as domestic work and sex services, working in private households and informal commercial sectors. Some are openly abused while others work in exploitative situations with little access to protection. Migration for work means that a whole group of women are unable to become involved in the politics of their own countries as leaders until they return.

## **Singapore – A Case Study**

It is true that today more women in Singapore are better educated. More women have tertiary education (56.6 percent<sup>20</sup>) as compared to men. More girls are finishing secondary school education than boys. Women have entered male-dominated fields such as accountancy and engineering and even surpassing them on some courses.

More women are also part of the labour force – 56 percent (the State’s report to the CEDAW committee). Many more have risen to hold top positions as heads of organisations or departments. An example would be to look at the top levels. Out of a total of 36 ambassadors, only four were women, equalling 11 percent.<sup>21</sup> The percentage dropped to 10 percent for female high commissioners.<sup>22</sup> However, more men hold managerial positions as compared to women by a ratio of 3:1 (Labour

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Force Survey data cited in government's report to CEDAW). By a ratio of 3:1 more women are in the lower strata working as clerks, when compared to men. While wages may be competitive, the monthly earnings of women represent 86 cents to every dollar earned by a man.

This picture of women in the workforce is no different from women around the world – the 'sticky floor' that keeps women at the lower levels of

the workforce and the 'glass ceiling' which women find difficult to break through to reach top positions. The reasons for this trend are also very similar – women put the brakes on their own career to meet the demands at home or because they cannot overcome or fight off deeply-rooted patriarchy at home or at the workplace. Women still occupy the traditional roles within the workforce as the table below shows.

**Table 6: Economically active person aged 15 & over by Gender and Occupation (2001 & 2005)**

Occupation	2001			2005*		
	Male	Female	Female %	Male	Female	Female %
Senior Officials & Manager	208,100	67,400	24.5	156,644	59,709	27.5
Professionals	143,700	98,000	40.5	119,911	84,687	41.2
Associate Professionals & Technicians	185,800	154,100	45.3	159,971	157,705	49.6
Clerical workers	60,900	214,000	77.8	55,810	176,691	76
Service & Sales Worker	124,300	106,300	46	130,307	109,098	45.6
Agriculture & Fishery Workers	--	--	--	972	235	19.4
Production Craftsmen & Related workers	117,300	9,900	7.8	101,853	8,749	7.9

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Plant & Machine Operators & Assemblers	159,700	59,900	27.3	132,791	40,791	23.5
Cleaners, Laborers & Related Workers	74,300	186,300	71.5	48,833	47,826	49.5
Workers Not Classified by Occupation	74,600	2,100	2.7	52,597	2,115	3.9

Source: Labour Force Survey 2001 & General Household Survey 2005.

However, in a modern day Singaporean household the woman's job is crucial as her income is needed for financial survival. In addition, the government's constant messages of self-reliance ensure that the population is trying its best to maintain their families. Both women and men in Singapore are conscious that their lifestyles have to balance career and parenthood or, at times, have to be part of a three-tier generational family set-up that includes parents and/or parents-in-law. The average Singaporean woman and her husband do feel the pressure of building a nest egg for themselves and their children.

Due to the need to sustain a dual-income family many homes employ a foreign domestic worker (FDW) – one in seven households in Singapore employs a FDW. There are 170,000 FDWs in Singapore who help women to remain in the workforce and who help families increase their nest egg through this dual-income strategy. As a result, there is no great pressure to

ensure that the state provides enough and well-staffed child-care or day care facilities for the elderly.

There are also rising numbers of single women who leave Singapore to work in places such as China, Dubai, the United States and the UK. This trend brings with it the rise in singlehood both among women and men. The young know that in this new economy led by information technology and life sciences the emphasis is on nurturing entrepreneurs, techno-preneurs and creative thinkers. They are faced with the pressure to remain nimble in order to stay ahead in the game and to avoid the prospects of redundancy that they have seen happening to colleagues, friends and family members.

Given this background and analysing the political climate of Singapore it is not surprising that many well-educated women remain apolitical and are not really encouraged to take up leadership positions in the arena of politics or to strive for it. Women remain pre-

occupied with keeping the family going and are more concerned with tracking their careers than to embark on a political career.

## **Recommendations - The Challenges**

### **Monitoring Mechanism(s)**

The report card discussed earlier in this paper shows that there is still much work that needs to be done. The last two decades have been very good in enhancing women's development as this has been the main focus globally, regionally and nationally. Such development programmes have also become well structured – with universal goals and common indicators at the United Nations level. The new goalpost identified in the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDG) will soon overtake the emphasis of the “Beijing Platform for Action” which was dedicated solely to the development of women. These changing goalposts, over-lapping monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and multiple indicators all point to the need for ASEAN to harmonise the Monitoring Mechanism on the “Declaration for the Advancement of Women” with other international instruments for effective comparisons to ascertain progress in people development.<sup>23</sup>

### **Migration/Trafficking**

Women are leaving homes and families to work in other countries and have become offshore bread-winners.<sup>24</sup> Southeast Asia is a main player with regard to this phenomenon as a huge

number of the female migrant labour force comes from this region.<sup>25</sup> They take up jobs as domestic workers, healthcare workers, front-line service staff and as sex workers within ASEAN or in other countries. The 2007 “ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers” is a way forward to protect the rights of the workers even if to date implementation plans remain vague. There is also an increase in the volume of tourists travelling in the region, primarily due to low-cost budget travel. More women within Southeast Asia will become vulnerable to becoming part of the sex industry due to poverty or to ignorance. They also risk contracting the HIV virus.

### **Globalisation**

Economic competition through globalisation has created opportunities as well as problems for micro-enterprises and small and medium enterprises (SME). Shrinking markets for certain products means unemployment. The shutting down of micro-enterprises means in particular more rural women will be without an income or without additional incomes. The ASEAN integration of economies on certain products is crucial to stave off competition and to keep women and men employed. The impact of globalisation has also increased the movement of people looking for jobs – from rural to urban set-ups or across borders. Women continue to run the bigger risk of being easily trafficked into markets where they are exploited – doing much more for less wages.

## **Women in Leadership Positions**

The current under-representation of women in leadership positions is unlikely to change until women stop thinking that these posts either need to be given to them or if they do not get them it is because they are undeserving. The world needs leaders with a vision, integrity and commitment to improve the lives of people. There is currently a pool of capable women that is hardly tapped in for leadership roles. We need to seize our own opportunities. We need to persuade countries to set up temporary special measures under CEDAW to approve mechanisms to help women get into politics. Approaches to mainstream gender must include gender-sensitisation courses for all civil service officers and the commitment to appraise policies from a gendered-perspective. In Southeast Asia, the well-known names are Corazon Aquino, Gloria Arroyo, Aung San Suu Kyi, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and Wan Azizah. However, the question remains whether these female leaders have simply presided or have actually acted as leaders and role models.

## **The role of Institutions**

It is important that all institutions which work towards democratisation. Even as we encourage women to enter politics to take the representation route has to be a temporary special measure in itself. Rwanda is a good example of how this has happened. Today it has the highest number of women in political leadership. MDGs and the Beijing Platform for Action if they had really

been adhered to would have by now given rise to a number of female leaders in South East Asia. We also have to be wary of the institutionalisation of religion that can limit the role of women in the public domain.

This is a long road ahead in Southeast Asia. Our best example is the Philippines where grassroots activism today has produced many women leaders who are also shaping policies both at government level and at the grassroots level. The other country is Thailand. Nevertheless, the politics of surviving in politics and still being focused on doing what is needed is always a challenge. Other countries can learn from these two examples and that the urgency to change is NOW as all these approaches take time to become effective.

## Endnotes

- 1 The HDI indices of Singapore is 0.916 (where 1 is the highest score) and Lao PDR the lowest ranked ASEAN country has a score of 0.553; United Nations Development Programme Publication; "The State of Human Development"; Human Development Report; pp 263-280; 2006
- 2 The ASEAN Secretariat; "Gender Dimensions of Globalisation and Regional Integration"; Third Report on the Advancement of Women in ASEAN; pp 11; 2007
- 3 ASEAN Secretariat; Third Regional Report; pp 21-23; 2007.
- 4 Ibid; pp 29, 2007
- 5 All data related to HDI, GDI and GEM need to be treated with caution in comparative analyses across countries because of variables and consistency, especially as gender-disaggregated data is hard to come by. Most indices are also self-limiting in that factors such as unemployment rates between men and women or the daily hours of housework performed by men and women are usually not included in the computation.
- 6 Source: United Nations Development Programme; Human Development Report 2006; pp 363-370; 2006
- 7 Ibid; 367
- 8 ASEAN Secretariat; Third Regional Report; pp29; 2007
- 9 Alistair McIndoe; "In the Philippines Women Bosses Rule"; The Straits Times; Singapore; Oct 15<sup>th</sup> 2007.
- 10 Vitit Muntaborn, Wimolsiri Jamnarbvej, Tanawadee Boonlue; "Status of Women: Thailand"; UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; Bangkok; 1990
- 11 UNESCO Report; "Status of women: Vietnam"; pp 11; 1989
- 12 Audrey Chin & Constance Singam: Singapore Women Re-Presented; pp 135-137; Landmark Books; 2004
- 13 Susan Blackburn: "Democratization and the Political Representation of Women in Southeast Asia". Paper presented at the ISEAS' Forum on Gender Issues in Southeast Asia; 2006. Prof Blackburn discusses Weylan's work in this area of relating leadership styles to slowing down the process of women getting a foothold in politics.
- 14 Includes the Nominated Member of Parliament scheme where members are selected for a fixed term by other elected MPs.
- 15 Quoting from Susan Blackburn's paper
- 16 Asean Secretariat; A Regional Report; 1996.
- 17 On November 20th, 1981, ACWO was formally established, comprising the National Council of Women's Organisations in each ASEAN member country.
- 18 <http://www.avert.org/aidssoutheastasia.htm>
- 19 Keiko Yamanka & Nicola Piper; "Feminized Migration in East and Southeast Asia: Policies, Actions and Empowerment"; United Nations Research Institute for Social Development; 2006



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- 20 AWARE Shadow Report to CEDAW Committee; Article 11; 2007
- 21 Singapore Government Directory Interactive updated on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2006
- 22 Singapore Government Directory Interactive updated on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2006
- 23 Sender countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have been negotiating for better wages for their female citizens who work abroad as domestic workers but seem reticent in recognizing wage issues for workers on home ground.
- 24 The female migrant labour figures are cited as half of the world's migrant population of 185-192 million. Shirlena Huang; "Women's Labour Migration in Southeast Asia: Foreign Domestic Workers and Worklife Balance in Singapore"; Panorama, Issue no 2/2006; pp 67; 2006.
- 25 It is estimated that 11.5 million people from South East Asian countries are working outside the homes (early 2000 figures) as cited in Graeme Hugo, "International Migration in South East Asia since World War 11" in Aris Ananta & Evi Nurvidya Arifin eds; International Migration in South East Asia; pp 47; 2004.



# Gender and Islam in Indonesia (Challenges and Solution)<sup>1</sup>

*Zaitunah Subhan*<sup>2</sup>

## Misinterpretations of the Quran

Islam comes to free mankind from all forms of oppression (*al-dzulumat*) and despotism (*al-thughyan*). Islam was faced with the reality of injustices in society and struggled to overcome these injustices as they opposed the actual mission of the religion. In society, injustices are sometimes carefully hidden or masked, and often by religion itself. Religion is often manipulated by (some of) its adherents to perpetuate the suppression of one group over another. As a result, religion can give the impression that it is somewhat hair-raising and frightening. Yet, in actual fact, did Islam not emerge to present God's blessings (*rahmat*) in the lives of mankind on earth? And did The Prophet not come to refine human morals?

One form of injustice that must be criticised and quickly eliminated is the inequality between men and women, which quite often leads to abuse, rape, marginalisation, stigmatisation, and violence by men towards women. In this case, women often become victims or are victimised. Worse still, religion

can be used as a weapon to initiate these tyrannical practices.

There are many misinterpretations of the holy text (Quran) that have resulted in the occurrence and increase of injustices experienced by women. For example, women are often perceived as second-class citizens<sup>3</sup> or mere accessories to men, and even the source of misfortune. Some believe that it is justified and appropriate to strike a woman and to curse her (if she does not obey her husband); that a woman is not permitted to be involved in activities outside the home; that she cannot choose for herself but must have another choose for her; and other interpretations that discriminate against women and which do not comply at all with the *sunnah* (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad, which, in actual fact, truly values women<sup>4</sup>.

Numerous violations related to violence against women occurred due to misinterpretation of Islamic teachings, for example, the incomplete reading of religious texts or use of *Tafsir* (The Holy Qur'an explanation) that is influenced by patriarchal culture. One example is the Al-quran verses about

*nusyuz*. Many people read only the term 'beat' but did not consider further the context of the verses. However, according to Imam Syafii, while beating a *nusyuz* wife is allowed, the priority is on restraining from doing so. The problem is that, in society, verses of the Qur'an concerning the *nusyuz* have become a justification for a husband's arbitrary attitude towards his wife. By looking at the context of the verse *nusyuz*, we may draw a different conclusion. In the period of the Prophet of SAW, a leader of Anshar, Sa'ad bin Rabi slapped his wife, Habibah binti Zaid because she was assumed to be disobedient. Habibah did not accept this treatment and came to the Prophet of SAW, who suggested that Habibah reciprocate. This caused much protest among the men of Madinah. In this context, the verses concerning *nusyuz* contain a sanction as in QS. An-Nisa/4:34. The Holy Qur'an wishes to prevent the hitting of wives and gradually abolish it.

Other forms of misinterpretation of Islamic views are related to polygamy, inheritance rights<sup>5</sup>, and women's rights to be witnesses and leaders. Polygamy is one of the Islamic views that is most misunderstood. Even though it is still debated, in reality many Moslem men own more than one wife. This is not at all due to a sense of justice, rather a physical desire which tends to result in women's misery, even though some women do find comfort in polygamy. There are some Moslem scholars who refuse to interpret Q.S AN-NISA/ 4:3 so as to justify polygamy. According to them, polygamy is nothing more than an extension of a pre Arab Islamic

tradition giving status and domicile to men. A man could take as many wives as he wanted, which can lead to women being more susceptible to violence. This *surah* was descended by Allah to correct such bad habits. In there it was said that polygamy is restricted to 2, 3 or 4 wives under very strict conditions, and this was strengthened in Q.S AN-NISA/ 4:129, that men can not give fair treatment to all of his wives, even if he tries very hard to do so. That is why Islam embraces monogamous marriage. Polygamy, which the Prophet of SAW practiced, had as its aim to help and protect orphans whose father died in battle. Of the Prophet's nine wives, only one was still a girl, the others were widows and mostly infirm.

Some Arab people still believe that inheritance can be passed on only to men, who are independent, and that woman may be considered endowed goods. Inheritance can also not be passed on to their boys who aren't *baligh* (not independent because they are too young and incapable of responsibility according to Islamic views), even though this tradition developed before the coming of Islam. QS AN-NISA/ 4:11 explains how inheritance is divided between men and women properly, which is by a composition of 2:1. Moslem scholars said the division was fair because women will accept dowry and are under no obligation to earn money in the family, and are not harmed. But if both men and women have the same function as parents (as fathers/mothers), they will get 1/6 each. A man cannot receive an inheritance if he has many sisters, in which case all of the inheritance goes to them.

During the initial era of Islam, women discovered and enjoyed a new-found freedom that, up until then, had never been attained by women from other civilisations on Earth. Women were given free range to be active, be involved in trading, to carry out *hijrah*, pursue knowledge and teach it to other, testify in court, fight in the battlefields, and to be the narrator of *Hadis*.

There are at least three groups with different views on the issues of gender in Indonesia.

1. The first group cannot accept the importance of gender issues. Instead, they argue that this issue originates from Western ideas which they reject.
2. The second group accepts the importance of gender issues because there is nothing about this issue that is against religious values. Equality and parity of right and obligation between man and women are taught in every religion. As it corresponds with religious values the issue could be explored in Islam courses.
3. The third group accepts this issue, yet hastens. They are met with resentment over some sensitive points that are seen as unacceptable for the majority of Moslems in Indonesia. They are often seen as having become too liberal.

## Woman Movement in Indonesia

RA. Kartini (1879-1904) was Indonesian's first woman activist campaigning for female emancipation. She criticised polygamy and the Islamic view of marriage. "*The Moslem allows a*

*man to have four wives at the same time. And although it is a thousand times over no sin according to the Moslem law and doctrine, I shall forever call it a sin... Everything for the man and nothing for the woman is our law and custom. Do you understand now the deep aversion I have for marriage? I would do the humblest work, thankfully and joyfully, if by it I could be independent.*" (Geertz 1976: 41-42). Kartini argued that if she had a daughter, she would be able to exercise her own free will and would not be forced into marriage against her will. Kartini had close links to the Dutch but she was not enamoured by Western culture. She was well aware how colonialists were exploiting Java and making workers miserable (a theme of the Dutch novel Max Havelaar, which she read). She combined in her thinking women's liberation, class liberation and national liberation.

Kartini came to learn about Pandita Ramabai, the Indian female reformer, and admired her as an Asian role model. Like Ramabai she started a school for girls, which by 1904 had 120 students. Her death in childbirth at the age of 25 put an untimely end to her activism. Her popular letters were published in Holland "Through Darkness into Light", went through four Dutch editions and were translated into Indonesian in 1923. A Kartini Foundation established a number of schools for girls and she became a national heroine and cult figure. She is remembered by celebrations on her birthday, 21 April in what is known as Kartini's Day, a national day (the other national day related to women being Mother's Day).

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## Gender and Islam in Indonesia (Challenges and Solution)

Gender issues started to develop in the 1980's in academic circles. The issue was discussed during discussion panels. In the 1990's, it became a religious issue. These issues were further developed in accordance with the arrival of translations of works on gender which can be categorized as feminist issues. These books were controversial at that time. Gender issues are widely known by people from a variety of social strata, especially since the 1999 presidential instruction of Indonesia no. 9/2000 known as PUG (mainstreaming gender) which provides means for the implementation of gender equity and equality in the family, society and country. The Indonesian government established an institution in 1978 (known as *KPP RI*, the Ministry of Women Empowerment of the Republic of Indonesia) to improve the status and position of women.

All government organisations and NGOs in Indonesia have to implement the Presidential Instruction of Indonesia Number 9/2000 on mainstreaming gender to implement gender equity and equality. The implementation of gender equity and equality is also supported by various laws and government regulations.

However, even if legislation provides for equal rights and responsibilities, mentalities and cultural practices still constitute obstacles which make change to be a slow and gradual process. We have to declare our strong commitment and political will to achieve concrete equality, to eradicate existing discriminations to women, to enhance the participation of women and to achieve their full integration in national development and society as essential elements for the development and establishment of true democracy.

## Endnotes

- 1 Forum on Gender Issues in East and Southeast Asia: Trends and Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Xian, Shanxi, China 19-20 October 2007
- 2 Expert Staff on Religious Affairs, Ministry of Women Empowerment, Indonesia, Lecture for Islamic Studies at UIN Jakarta
- 3 This assumption is based on the interpretation of Quran surah An-Nisa 1 – “God said that it is he who created you from a single soul and created there from his mate, and from them twain spread many men and women”. No verse in the holy text states that women are not distinguished. Only in the *hadits* [oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, Ed] is it understood that women were created from the ribs of man and are thus only the second creation. It must be understood by the metaphor that before and after the word *istaushu*, that means women and men must live side by side.
- 4 Muhammad said 3 times, “your mother”, after he is asked by one of his followers who amongst his relatives comes first and before all others. Muhammad also said that surely women are sisters to men.
- 5 Nisa: 32, “Men shall have a share of that which they have earned, and women a share of that which they have earned [...]”

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# Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions<sup>1</sup>

*Varaporn Chamsanit<sup>2</sup>*

Sexuality has been an issue of social activism in Thailand for the past two decades, but until recently such activism was often confined to matters directly affecting the private life of homosexual people, such as safe sex education and HIV/AIDS prevention for gay men and building supportive communities for lesbian women. For the most part, these issues are non-political in the sense that they do not directly challenge the status quo of formal political institutions. During the past few years, however, sexuality has come to the fore in the civil society movement in Thailand. Unlike campaigns and activism of earlier times, current debates about sexuality are often expressed in the language of rights claims. This happens when pressure groups start to confront formal political institutions with issues related to sexuality and sexual rights. This is to the effect that the issue of sexuality, commonly regarded as a personal issue that does not deserve public deliberation, has now been brought to the formal political arena. Arguably, these political campaigns

around the issue of sexuality and sexual rights, to be discussed in this paper, pose a challenge to the status quo of formal political institutions. In this paper, I discuss the emergence of sexuality as a rallying point for the civil society movement in Thailand. The paper starts with a discussion of the meaning of sexuality, followed by a look back to an earlier stage in which the issue of sexuality came to public attention. Next is a discussion of more recent campaigns to promote acceptance of sexual diversity and sexual rights and how the issue of sexuality becomes politicised.

## Defining Sexuality

The word 'sexuality' tends to create different perceptions and reactions among different people. To many, the word has the same connotation as 'homosexuality', meaning that the issue of sexuality relates only to people who have same-sex relationships. In many cases, sexuality is narrowly considered as purely related to physical sexual acts

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## **Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions**

(Pan 2005: 61). However, a survey of academic literature on sexuality in Asia shows that the meaning of sexuality in research studies has expanded to include sexual intimacy and relationships, gender practices, reproductive policies, prostitution, marital organisation, family life, sexual identities, and more (Loos, unpublished manuscript: 6). The spread of HIV/AIDS has brought the discussion of sexuality into the public sphere, as in discussions about public health policies and policies on sex education (see for example, Chalidaporn 2004 and Zhang 2005). Sexuality has also become part of discussions on sex work, sexual exploitation, migration and human trafficking (see for example, The Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality and Health 2006 and Misra & Chandiramani, eds 2006).

My observation of academic and social movements on sexuality in Thailand in the past year has seen a number of attempts by scholars and social activists to pin down the Thai translation of the English word 'sexuality' and its definition. The tendency is to come up with an inclusive definition that is not limited to the physical sexual relationship but includes psychological and social components of one's sexual life, including emotion, intimacy, fantasy, identity, choice of livelihood, means by which one's sexuality can be expressed and recognised in society, and issues related to reproduction and sexual health. Another tendency is to define sexuality in such a way that it relates not only to homosexuality but reflects the actual diversity and fluidity of human sexual experiences, including heterosexuality

and other forms of sexuality. Despite these discursive attempts to come up with inclusive definitions, however, matters related to people of sexual minority, namely homosexual and transgender/transsexual people, seem to be the most salient issue in the civil society movement around sexuality in Thailand these days, and this salient issue is the focus of this paper.

### **Bringing sexuality to the public**

The Thai military coup of 19 September 2006 resulted in the abolition of the country's constitution. By mid 2007, a process of drafting a new constitution was underway. The Constitution Drafting Assembly, the body responsible for this task, was under the obligation to solicit comments on the draft constitution from different social sectors. Among various groups and organisations giving their input to the Drafting Assembly was a network of twelve organisations working on issues affecting people of sexual minority. Following a series of meetings and discussions, the network proposed to the Drafting Assembly that a clause be inserted in the new constitution that would guarantee protection against discrimination for people of sexual minority. This proposal will be discussed in more detail below. For now, given that Thailand has had no laws that either forbid or recognise homosexuality and transgenderism / transsexualism,<sup>3</sup> it is interesting to see how the civil society movement on sexuality has evolved to its current stage of engaging the national legislative body and calling for the

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## Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions

constitutional right to equality and non-discrimination for people of marginalised sexuality.

In its early stage, sexuality-based social activism can be divided into two strands. The first of these strands involves activism for lesbian women, or 'women who love women' (*ying rak ying* in Thai) as activists working on this issue prefer to be called. The first lesbian activist group ever established in Thailand is called 'Anjaree'. Much has been written about the 'Anjaree Group' in literature on homosexuality in Thailand. The group arguably branched out from the women's movement in the late 1980s and derives its politics from feminisms and human rights. It started as a small group of lesbian activists coming together to discuss their lives, sexuality and other social concerns. The group began to open itself to public attention between the years 1990 and 1993 by organising or joining in the organisation of conferences and promoting public recognition of the group in the press. Following its first public appearance, 'Anjaree' expanded to include lesbian women from various walks of life. 'Anjaree' plays the dual role of providing peer support for lesbian women and promoting social recognition and acceptance of homosexual people in society from the rights-based perspective (Kritaya & Kanokwan, unpublished manuscript, Sulaiporn 2002, Sinnott 2004). By far, 'Anjaree' seems to be the only group of lesbian women that most clearly deploys feminist politics and the human rights approach in its activism. In later years, other groups of lesbian women have been set up, including a group called

'Lesla' and other locally based groups, but these groups tend to focus more on building communities for women who have relationships with women rather than calling for their rights (for comparison between Anjaree and Lesla groups, see Sinnott 2004: chapter 6).

The other early strand of sexuality-based activism in Thailand also started in the second half of the 1980s, following the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the country in 1984. This strand of activism features gay men activists who worked to promote safe sex and the prevention of HIV/AIDS among gay men. Given that the first recorded case of HIV infection in Thailand was that of a gay man, gay men came to be regarded as a 'high-risk' group during the early period of anti-HIV/AIDS campaigns. In 1986, the *Sen-see-khao* (literally 'white line') Group, a group of gay male dancers, was created to work on educational campaigns to promote safe sex and HIV/AIDS prevention. This was followed by the establishment of a parallel gay men activist group called 'Fraternity for AIDS Cessation' (FACT) in the following year (Kanitta 2003). While campaigns and activities such as those organised by *Sen-see-khao* and FACT might help to mitigate social discrimination against gay men in the last instance, demanding for recognition of the rights of homosexual people did not seem to be part of the objectives of these two groups. Both *Sen-see-khao* and FACT later became inactive as the sense of urgency surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the public has declined and more organisations had been set up to work on the same issue.

The change in the political climate

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following the successful public uprising for democracy in 1992 and the promulgation of the (now abolished) 1997 Constitution – dubbed the people’s constitution – has breathed new life into the civil society movement. In the area of sexuality-based activism, new groups and organisations have since been established, such as ‘Bangkok LGBT’ under Amnesty International Thailand (now inactive); ‘Bangkok Rainbow’; ‘Rainbow Sky Association’; ‘Sapaan: Alternative Media for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender’; ‘Gay in Politics’ (*gay-kan-mueng*); ‘Sexual Diversity Fund’ and others. ‘Anjaree’, which was started well before the democratic uprising and promulgation of the 1997 constitution, has continued to be active. ‘Lesla’ and other same-sex social groups mentioned above were also set up in the period after the 1992 uprising.

Towards the end of 1996 and early 1997, a public incident occurred which marks a shift in the civil society movement for people of non-normative sexuality in Thailand. This is a case in which the Rajabhat Institute – a nationwide system of higher educational institutes specialised in teachers training – announced that it would not admit students with “deviant sexual behaviours”. A public poll which stated that parents felt reluctant to place their children under the care of homosexual teachers was cited as the main reason (*Siam Post*, 22 January 1997). This announcement resulted in a public outcry from sexuality-based activist groups, led by ‘Anjaree’, and other human rights organisations (*Matichon*, 22 January 1997). Again, a number of

scholars writing on homosexuality in Thailand have discussed the Rajabhat case (Jackson 1997, Morris 1997, Sinnott 2004, Kritaya & Kanokwan unpublished manuscript). Caught in a rather unexpected public protest, Rajabhat Institute soon decided to withdraw its ban on homosexual and transgender students.

Another much cited public dispute over the issue of sexual minority occurred in 1999 when Thailand’s Public Relations Department, allegedly in reaction to public complaints about frequent appearances of people of non-normative sexualities in television programs, issued an order that all television stations be more restraint about presenting characters who were “sexually deviant” (*Thaipost*, 11 June 1999). News of this order led to another protest by various organisations working on sexuality and human rights. The protesters argued that the Department’s order was unconstitutional, and that its issuance was an act of discrimination and violation of the right to freedom of expression and the right of people of sexual minority to work (*Thaipost*, 11 June 1999).

These two incidents demonstrate a shift in the reality of and the discourse on sexuality in Thailand. We see how state institutions attempted to intervene in issues related to sexual identities and sexual behaviours of its citizens although there are no laws penalising homosexual and transgender behaviour. This impulse on the part of the state to intervene suggests perhaps that there has been greater participation, and therefore greater visibility, of people of sexual minority in the public sphere

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and state institutions in recent times. Both, the greater visibility of people of sexual minority and the state's sanctions, point to the fact that the issue of sexuality has permeated to the public arena, particularly the bureaucracy and other state institutions.

The presence of human rights groups, the use anti-discrimination language and the claim to constitutional rights during the public protests discussed above indicate a change in which the discourse on sexuality has merged with the human rights discourse. The state's efforts to intervene also point to how state institutions failed to keep up with this discursive change. The public protests also testify how issues related to sexuality may pose a challenge to the status quo of state institutions. The next section elaborates how this kind of challenge has become intensified in the past few years.

### **Politicising sexuality and challenging state institutions**

In 2005, a network of organisations working to protect the rights of people of sexual minority, with the support of Thailand's National Human Rights Commission, started to campaign for the Ministry of Defence to end a discriminatory practice against transgender or transsexual men in the process of military conscription. Said practice is a form of discrimination against men who have altered their physical appearance and sexual identity to become transgender or transsexual persons. By law, all Thai male citizens at the age of twenty-one years old, with

few exemptions, are subject to compulsory military conscription and, if selected, have to serve in the military for a period of two years. The so-called transgender or transsexual men, whose legal identity remains a male person, must also enlist even though they will normally be discharged on the grounds of their non-normative sexual identity. But the story does not end there, for in order to disqualify transgender men, the Ministry of Defence had, until 2006, the practice of stating on official records that these men suffered from "a permanent mental disorder". This declaration of mental disorder was put down on the official paper called *sor dor 43*, which discharged transgender or transsexual men from military services. Yet, men are normally required to present their *sor dor 43* paper to their potential employer when applying for a job. This becomes a source of discrimination as potential employers tend to be reluctant to recruit a person with a record of a permanent mental disorder despite their other qualifications (*Post Today*, 16 November 2006).

Towards the end of 2005, gay rights and human rights groups in Thailand successfully campaigned for the Ministry of Defence to stop the practice of labelling transgender / transsexual men as having a mental disorder. The change in the military records started to take effect in April 2006 (*Daily News*, 31 March 2006). However, the Ministry of Defence refuses to correct old official records issued to transgender men enlisted and discharged prior to 2006. This means that transgender men who were labelled mentally ill by the military before 2006 will have to live with this

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## Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions

stigmatisation for the rest of their lives. To counter this problem, gay rights activists have filed a lawsuit in the Administrative Court against the Ministry of Defence, charging the Ministry with discrimination against transgender / transsexual people. This case is still pending in the Court (*Matichon* 30 November 2006).

The next sexuality-based campaign to be discussed relates to the drafting of Thailand's latest constitution mentioned above. This constitution came into force in August 2007, following a military coup that abolished the preceding constitution the year before. During the constitution drafting process, members of the Sexual Diversity Network – a network of twelve organisations working on issues related to people of sexual minority – gathered to discuss constitutional rights of sexually marginalised people. With the support of the National Human Rights Commission, the Network proposed to the Constitution Drafting Assembly that a clause on sexual diversity be added to the anti-discrimination article (Article 30) of the new constitution. If this proposed addition were to be made, the second clause of Article 30 of the new constitution would read: “Men, women and people of diverse sexualities shall have equal rights” (Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand and National Human Rights Commission 2007: 125).

It is interesting to note that the Sexuality Diversity Network decided to use the Thai term ‘*bukkhon phu mi khwam laklai thang phet*’ (roughly translated as ‘people of diverse sexualities’) or ‘*khwam laklai thang phet*’

(sexual diversity) as an equivalent to the English term ‘sexual orientation’. The book entitled *Human Rights of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender and Intersex People* (Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand and National Human Rights Commission 2007) provides a snapshot of this discursive practice. The book contains English-language excerpts from the constitutions of several countries that provide anti-discrimination protection on the ground of sexual orientation. In all Thai translations of these excerpts, the English term ‘sexual orientation’ is translated into *kwam laklai thang phet* or ‘sexual diversity’. Here I quote a passage from this book which helps to explain the politics of discourse and how the Network decided on the term sexual diversity:

... *The term sexual diversity resembles the term cultural diversity already contained in the draft constitution. ... The term sexual diversity is a new term in Thai society. It was first coined about two years ago [2005] by organisations working on people who have same-sex relationships, men who love men, women who love women, people who have bisexual relationships, transgender people, etc. These organisations agree that if we are to include people of all sexually marginalised groups, we need to find the most neutral term that is neither degrading nor giving emphasis to social hierarchies. We, the Sexual Diversity Network, therefore decided to use this term [sexual diversity].* (Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand and National Human Rights Commission 2007: 172, my translation)

Nevertheless, despite all the lobbying

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## Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions

efforts by the Sexual Diversity Network and debates among legislators, the Constitution Drafting Assembly eventually turned down the Network's proposal that the clause "people of diverse sexualities" be added to the constitution. This rejection was made on the grounds that the term diverse sexualities or sexual diversity was too obscure. Consequently, the 2007 constitution of Thailand does not contain any reference to sexual diversity or sexually marginalised people.

### Conclusion

The civil society movement on issues related to sexuality has evolved over the past two decades in Thailand. There are several aspects to the issue of sexuality, with relations between the concepts of gender and sexuality, sexuality and class, and the interaction between transnational and local discourses on sexuality being some of the interesting aspects which I hope to cover in other papers in the future. In this paper, I have focused on change in the movement for people of sexual minority, mainly homosexual and transgender / transsexual people. Over the years, social activism for sexually marginalised people has changed its forms and focuses, from seemingly obnoxious or less politicised issues, such as safe sex education and building supportive communities, to issues and approaches that challenge the authority of state institutions. In its early years, social activism on sexually marginalised people was divided along the line of sexual identities into activism for gay men and that for lesbian women. Later on, we have seen more activism in the

form of *ad hoc* coalitions in reaction to overt discriminatory acts by state institutions, such as in the protests against the Rajabhat Institute and the Public Relations Department discussed above. Unlike the activism of earlier years, which was more or less divided between gay men and lesbian women, this type of *ad hoc* coalitional activism tends to be more inclusive in terms of sexual identities; it mobilises sexually marginalised people from different sub-groups who work together towards an immediate goal. In the past few years, we see more newcomers in the movement, namely transgender / transsexual and inter-sex people. This is in line with an emphasis placed on the sexual diversity discourse, as in the public campaign led by the Sexual Diversity Network during the drafting of the 2007 constitution. The civil society movement for sexually marginalised people seems to have found its strength in inclusive coalitional politics that flags as its goal the acceptance of sexual diversity in society.

Another marked shift in the movement for people of sexual minority is the coming together of the discourses on sexuality and human rights, as exemplified in the involvement of human rights groups in public protests on sexuality-related issues, and the use of rights-oriented language such as in the charge of discrimination placed against state institutions and the call for constitutional rights on the ground of sexual diversity. The focus of the movement has also shifted from merely reacting to emergent incidents of discrimination by certain government

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## Civil Society Movement on Sexuality in Thailand: A Challenge to State Institutions

agencies to identifying and campaigning against long-term discriminatory practices faced by sexually marginalised people. The use of the human rights approach can be attributed in large part to the international flows of the human rights discourse. Also, the movement has become proactive as seen in its effort to call for constitutional protection for people of marginalised sexualities, although without success.

In conclusion, social activism for sexually marginalised people has become

more politicised. It has moved from addressing issues related to the private life of homosexual people to combating discrimination in the public sphere and demanding equality and rights on the grounds of the sexual attribute of the person. Sexuality and sexual rights have become a public issue, and public disputes on issues related to sexuality are more likely to pose a challenge to state institutions these days.

### Endnotes

- 1 This paper is revised from the author's presentation entitled "Gender and Sexuality: State Policies and Civil Society Actions" presented at the Forum on Gender Issues in East and Southeast Asia, 19-20 October 2007, Xian, China.
- 2 A faculty staff member at the Office of Human Rights Studies and Social Development, Mahidol University, Thailand.
- 3 This is with an exception of two abolished laws. One is the short-lived rape law of 1898 which prescribed a maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment for the sodomy act. In the Penal Code of 1909, the penalty for this sexual act was reduced to the maximum of three years. However, this clause of the 1909 Penal Code was never enforced and was abolished in 1956 (Matana 1995).

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## **Joint Statement of the ASEAN High-Level Meeting on Good Practices in CEDAW Reporting and Follow-up Vientiane, 14-15 January 2008**

1. We, the delegates of ten ASEAN Member Countries, namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam, gathered at the ASEAN High-Level Meeting on Good Practices in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Reporting and Follow-up on 14-15 January 2008 in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic.
2. We reaffirmed the importance of the CEDAW as a guiding framework of the 1988 Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA), the outcome of the Twenty Third Special Session of the UN General Assembly in 2000, the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, the 2004 Bangkok Communiqué adopted at the UNESCAP Regional Review of the BPFA and the 2004 ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in ASEAN. The implementation of these important documents has contributed to the implementation of the ASEAN vision 2020 and the purposes and principles of the ASEAN Charter.
3. We recognized the steady progress achieved in ASEAN Member Countries in the enhancement of the role and contributions of ASEAN women and in mainstreaming gender into policies, plans, programmes and budgets. In this regard, we reiterated the Joint Statement and Commitment to Implement Gender Mainstreaming within the Context of CEDAW, BPFA and MDGs adopted at the ASEAN High-level Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming held on 15-16 November 2006 in Jakarta, Indonesia, and reaffirmed the importance of the CEDAW as one of the international instruments for gender mainstreaming together with the BPFA and MDGs.
4. We reiterated our commitment to fulfilling the obligation of the States Parties to the CEDAW in implementing the Convention, submitting periodic reports to the CEDAW Committee and following up on the Concluding Comments.

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## Joint Statement of the ASEAN High-Level Meeting on Good Practices in CEDAW Reporting and Follow-up

5. We agreed to continue sharing experiences and good practices in the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the CEDAW.
  6. We agreed to further enhance the CEDAW implementation, monitoring and reporting through the following:
    - a. Follow the reporting guidelines of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women;
    - b. Assign a State agency to undertake a lead in coordinating the process of the CEDAW implementation and preparing periodic reports to the Committee;
    - c. Promote a collective whole-government approach in drafting the CEDAW periodic reports through the establishment of inter-agency working groups;
    - d. Strengthen the existing national CEDAW reporting and monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness among the relevant government agencies;
    - e. Establish a monitoring database and ensure easily available and accessible sex-disaggregated data and information;
    - f. Integrate issues raised in the CEDAW Concluding Comments into national and sectoral development plans as and when relevant.
  7. We recognized that capacity-building is an important factor in the efforts to fulfil the obligation under CEDAW. We agreed to continue to undertake national efforts as well as further deepen and broaden ASEAN cooperation by continuing to exchange views and experiences towards sustainable capacity development for the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the CEDAW.
  8. We agreed to continue enhancing cooperation and partnerships with all stakeholders, UN agencies and other relevant non-government partners of ASEAN in the effort to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. In this regard, we would appreciate technical support with respect to developing strategies for implementing the CEDAW and fulfilling reporting obligation.
  9. We noted with satisfaction that all ASEAN Member Countries had ratified the CEDAW. Therefore, we encouraged some ASEAN Member Countries which still maintain some reservations to consider removing the reservations to the Convention.
  10. We encouraged ASEAN Member Countries which have not ratified the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW to study the Optional Protocol and its requirement.
  11. We agreed to hold the 2nd ASEAN High-Level Meeting on Good Practices in the CEDAW Reporting and Follow-up in 2010.
- Adopted in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic, on 15 January 2008.
- Source: <http://www.aseansec.org/21309.htm>

## Web Links on Europe and Asia

Timely and up-to-date information is a necessity for policy-makers and researchers. In an increasingly information-dependent world, the Internet is an unsurpassed medium for rapid dissemination of news. The following is a compilation of websites that offer invaluable insights and timely information on Southeast Asian issues and Asia-Europe relations.

### ASEAN Secretariat

<http://www.aseansec.org>

The homepage of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, this site provides information on the latest ASEAN meetings as well as archived documents.

### Asia News Network

<http://www.asianewsnet.net>

Established with support from Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Asia News Network (ANN) website offers news updates and commentaries from 13 major dailies in Southeast Asia who are members of ANN.

### Asia Daily

<http://wn.com/s/asiadaily/index.html>

Part of the World News Network, Asia Daily offers news pertaining to Asia as well as links to the various Asian news sites.

### Asia Source

<http://www.asiasource.org>

A project of the US-based Asia Society, Asia Source provides information on various aspects of Asia, such as arts and culture, business and economics, policy and government and social issues. It also offers access to information by experts and also links to pages that focus on Asian lifestyle, education and statistics.

### Asia-Inc

<http://www.asia-inc.com>

Asia-Inc is a monthly regional business magazine targeted mainly at Asian executives, with emphasis on business news in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. The website offers articles featured in its publication, which provide insights into the Asian business community.

### Asia-Europe Foundation

<http://www.asef.org>

The Asia-Europe Foundation was established by the members of the Asia-

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## Web Links on Europe and Asia

Europe Meetings (ASEM) on 15 February 1997 with the objective of promoting better mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two regions. The website provides a listing of the activities and events of the Foundation as well as speeches delivered at ASEM events, media articles, press releases and book reviews with special interest in Asia and Europe.

### **The Asia Society**

<http://www.asiasociety.org>

The Asia Society is an American nonprofit, non-partisan educational organisation dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and the peoples of the Asia and the Pacific. The website features details of the events organised by the Society, the speeches delivered and a selection of the Society's publications.

### **BBC News Asia Pacific**

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asiapacific/default.stm>

Part of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Internet network, this site is updated daily with top stories from the Asia-Pacific region.

### **CNN Interactive – World Regions – Asia Pacific**

<http://edition.cnn.com/ASIA>

Part of the Cable News Network (CNN)

online news portal, this site is updated daily with the top stories from the region. It also has links to other media such as TIME magazine and The New York Times belonging to parent company AOL Time Warner.

### **The East-West Center**

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org>

The East-West Center is an education and research organisation that helps promote the establishment of a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia Pacific community. It is a source of information and analysis about the Asia-Pacific Region, including the United States. Some 2,000 scholars, government and business leaders, educators, journalists and other professionals throughout the region work with Center staff annually to address issues of contemporary significance.

### **The European Union Online**

<http://www.europa.eu.int>

The server of the European Union provides access to the homepages of the EU institutions with news, press releases and on-line documentation of EU meetings in several European languages.

## **Far Eastern Economic Review**

<http://www.feer.com>

The online version of the weekly magazine on Asia's economic and business news. It contains some of the stories and features carried in the magazine. FEER also offers a free e-mail news service which is a digest of the major features carried on their website.

## **German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)**

<http://www.dgap.org/english/summary.htm>

The main goals of the German Society for Foreign Affairs (DGAP) are: to stimulate interest in international questions, to promote worldwide scholarly cooperation, and hence to increase understanding between nations. The DGAP was founded in 1955 as an independent, non-partisan, non-profit association. Its aims, organisation, and mode of financing are similar to those of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London.

## **Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)**

<http://www.iseas.edu.sg>

Established in 1968, ISEAS is a regional research centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic

trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The ISEAS website provides details of its research programmes as well as a full catalogue of publications.

## **Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)**

<http://www.oecd.org>

The OECD has an exclusive membership of 30 developed economies that share a commitment to democratic government and the market economy. Since its establishment three decades ago, OECD has moved beyond a focus on its own members to embrace the entire global economy, with active relationships with some 70 other countries, NGOs and civil societies. Its website contains an on-line bookshop covering the policy studies undertaken by the OECD as well as details of the workshops.

## **European Union in the World**

[http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/index.htm)

The website of the European Commission's Directorate General External Relations (DG Relex) provides information and documents relating to the Union's external affairs listed by country, region and policy area.

## **Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)**

<http://www.ceps.be/index3.php>

The Brussels-based Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) serves as a leading forum for debate on EU affairs. With a strong in-house research capacity and an extensive network of partner institutes throughout the world, the Centre runs a number of research programmes on EU politics and policies including on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy. The website contains information on its research activities, events, networks and publications.

## **ASEAN Regional Forum**

<http://www.aseanregionalforum.org/>

Established in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is an informal multilateral dialogue in the Asia Pacific region. Its aim is to foster dialogue and consultation on political and security

issues and to contribute to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the region. The website is maintained by the ASEAN Secretariat and contains information on ARF activities, related documents and contact details.

## **Asia Institute Europe (AIE)**

<http://www.asia-institute-europe.eu/>

Asia Institute Europe (AIE) is a Brussels-based independent intellectual resource on Asia and a public platform for innovative research, knowledge partnerships and policy exchange. AIE analyses socio-economic and political developments and anticipates trends in the EU-Asia context and their impact on Europe, Asia and globally. AIE boasts a comprehensive network of key experts and policy-makers. The website contains news from China, India and Asia, a list of the institute's publications as well as information on its activities.



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## ABSTRACTS

**V**araporn Chamsanit's paper examines official discourses on sexuality in Thailand as produced by state agencies, politicians and bureaucrats, and presented through the media and other official channels including policies, laws and regulations. The dialectic relationship between the state and civil society movements for sexual rights is also discussed. The key concern of this article is to demonstrate how sexuality and sexual rights are a contested issue in contemporary Thailand, and how different state organs may take different approaches to these issues. The paper ends with a discussion of how, in recent years, sexuality has become an important rallying point for the movements towards gender equality in Thailand.

**R**egina Hechanova argues that there are many changes in the traditional roles held by women and men in the Philippines. More women are entering male dominated fields and the boom in certain industries, such as call centres, has also contributed to increasing employment opportunities for women. In addition, women leave homes to work in other countries. Dual income career couples have become the norm. This paper examines how this shift in traditional roles has affected work-life balance issues for society while also examining government policies aimed at re-defining men's and women's roles in addressing the work-life balance for families.

**L**iu Lige discusses the importance of political rights for women under reference to village-level elections in China. Due to historical, economic, and cultural reasons women's participation in political affairs remain at a lower level in China compared to most other developing countries. This is especially the case in rural areas where women form large parts of the population but show low levels of political participation. During the 6th village-level election in 2005, the Shaanxi Women's Federation sought to promote rural women's participation in elections and politics with a particular view to raising female representation in Villager Committees. This paper analyses the full course of the election while also discussing necessary policies and measures to further promote rural women's participation in politics.

**B**raema Mathiapparanam observes that while half of the workforce in Singapore comprises women, of whom more than half are graduates, there are no full-Ministers and not enough women who rise to leadership positions. Her paper traces the development of women in Singapore and compares the progress made by women with some of Singapore's ASEAN neighbours. The paper also reviews the role played by government and civil society actors to enhance the status of women in Singapore while examining reasons for the disproportionately smaller representation as decision-makers in both the private and public sectors.

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**Zaitunah Subhan** begins her article with the observation that Gender and Islam in Indonesia have been discussed by many academics since the 1990s. Her article notes that the majority amongst the Indonesian community are convinced that religious beliefs on the roles of men and women are defined by Qur'an-Hadits. However, there are many challenges to this interpretation. The author argues that Islam regards men and women as complementary to each other yet patriarchal culture has, from time to time, influenced the understanding of Islam with regards to gender issues. One of the solutions may be to increase the understanding of leaders of religion, cultural studies, academics, communities and officials on gender within Islam.



