

THE RISE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL POWER IN ASIA'S GROWING ECONOMIES

INSIGHTS FROM THE PHILIPPINES¹

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Long confined to the home for a variety of reasons, women have been moving into new arenas including in the professions, in business and in politics in many parts of the world in recent years. Asia is no different from other regions in this respect. Although the Philippines is perceived as diverging from the regional norm in regard to the role of women in society generally speaking, it shares some of the disadvantages suffered by women elsewhere in the Asian region on account of gender. For instance, until the 1950s to the early 1960s, breaking the professional ceiling was still a challenge for Filipino women. Until then, the legal and engineering professions remained male domains. It would take a few more years before Filipino women would break the ceiling in the professional domain. Even at present with the rise of women's entrepreneurial and leadership power, Filipino women remain disadvantaged in the country's laws pertaining to persons and family relations, for example. Traditional values, including religious ones, inhibited the serious consideration of adopting a law governing women's reproductive health until lately.²

Asia, particularly East and Southeast Asia, is the home of the world's fastest growing economies. Before the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Southeast Asia was regarded as



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- 1 | A paper inspired by a panel on this theme at the 3rd International Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership Summit, 8-9 Nov 2012, Istanbul, Turkey.
- 2 | The Reproductive Health (RH) Law was signed into law during the 2012 Christmas Holidays by President Benigno S. Aquino III. This law was preceded by a hugely hostile and divisive debate across Philippine society and government.

the world's most economically dynamic region transformed as such by Japan's earlier economic rise as the world's second largest economy. Japan has been replaced in this position by China as of 2010. Amidst the overall decline of the North American and European economies as well as the ongoing global financial and economic crises, Asia has shown not only great resilience, but also continuing economic dynamism. The Philippines shares in this regional

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economic growth by posting a 7.1 per cent growth in the third quarter of 2012, the highest among the countries that form part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).³ Its National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) also recently projected that the country's economy will grow in 2012 by a higher percentage point than it originally projected. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Managing Director Christine Lagarde during a visit in November 2012 hailed the Philippines as being among the world's best economic performers, having posted a fairly high growth and having become a creditor to the IMF.⁴ Has economic growth led to a rise in women's entrepreneurial and leadership power in the Asian region in general and in the Philippines in particular? How can the role of women in these rising economies be described?

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURIAL AND LEADERSHIP POWER IN ASIA

It is fairly well-acknowledged that women constitute a key driver in economic growth. Citing statistics from a number of sources, the Economist Intelligence Unit argues that most of the world's developed economies were driven by the entry of women into the labour force during the second half of the 20th century, adding almost two percentage points to economic growth in the case of the United States, and accounting for one fourth of Europe's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth since 1995.⁵ In the Asian region, the shift from manufacturing to services led to an increase in

3 | See National Economic Development Agency (NEDA), "Exports continue positive growth in Oct. PHL among top Asian performers in first 10 months of 2012", Press Release, 11 Dec 2012.

4 | Cf. Edith Regalado and Aurea Calica, "Philippines is Asia's Rising Tiger – World Bank", *The Philippine Star*, 6 Feb 2013.

5 | Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Women's economic opportunity 2012*, 4.

women's participation in the labour force, thereby boosting economic growth in the region.⁶ Yet, women are the world's most undeveloped source of labour with nearly 50 per cent of working age among them remaining outside the formal sector. Outside they have less access to resources and income than men. Often being less productive than men, their exclusion from the formal sector holds the economy down. Thus, in order to boost the global economy, it is important for this group of women, all 1.5 billion of them worldwide, to join the labour force in an enabling environment where the legal, social, financial and educational constraints blocking women's productivity are dismantled.⁷

Recent studies about the role of women in Asian societies, however, show an increasing rise of their entrepreneurial and leadership power. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, a study of six East and Southeast Asian economies⁸ acknowledged the disappearance of the gender gap in secondary education though not at the university level in countries like South Korea, documented the steadily increasing proportion of women in the total growth of the labour force in the region, cited the view expressed by some quarters "that the labour-intensive export-led industrialization drives in Asia would not have been possible without the participation of women",⁹ and concluded generally that "Asian women have played an increasingly important role in economic growth".¹⁰ The study also concluded that "[w]hile the proportion of working women who hold professional, technical, and administrative positions has increased in recent decades, it is still quite low".¹¹ For example, during 1960 to 1990, the proportion of working women holding such better-paid positions increased from five to 13 per cent in Japan and from one to four per cent in Thailand. Indeed, while there was an increase, the numbers remained low.

6 | Theresa W. Devasahayam and Sri Ranjini Mei Hua, "Empowering Women, Boosting Economies: Examples from the Asian Region", *Gender Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Mar 2011, 1 et seq.

7 | EIU, n. 5, 4.

8 | These economies are Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia.

9 | As cited in "Women are Key Players in the Economies of East and Southeast Asia", *Asia-Pacific & Population Policy*, East-West Center Program on Population, No. 44, Jan 1998, 2.

10 | *Ibid.*, 1.

11 | *Ibid.*, 2.

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This record has changed in an uneven fashion throughout the Asian region. Some countries experienced great strides towards gender equality, while others lagged behind or achieved only incremental improvements. For example, the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2011* (GGG)¹² puts the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia among the top five Asia-Pacific countries (the other two are Australia and New Zealand) in overall performance in narrowing the gender gap, while the bottom five are Pakistan (133rd out of 135 countries assessed for gender equality), Nepal, India, South Korea, and Cambodia. In the area of women leadership, the Philippines joins Australia and New Zealand as the three highest-ranked countries, while in senior management, female advancement, remuneration, and wage equality these three top performers are joined by Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Mongolia. Surely, the election on 19 December 2012 of South Korea's first female president, Park Geun-hye, daughter of former strongman Park Chung-hee, would alter this country's performance in the next GGG report. There are also "laggards" in overall GGG rankings such as Malaysia (97th out of 135 countries in the 2012 GGG Report), Japan (98th), Cambodia (102nd), South Korea (107th), India (113th), Nepal (126th), and Pakistan (133rd).¹³ It is also noteworthy that there is no correspondence between a country's performance in the 2011 GGG and the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). The *UNDP Human Development Report 2011* assessed 187 countries and grouped them into four categories: very high, high, medium, and low human development countries. Japan, South Korea, and Singapore belong to only 47 out of 187 countries with very high human development,¹⁴ yet the 2011 GGG Report ranked them lower in overall performance than the Philippines which is assessed as being only among the medium human development group of countries.

12 | World Economic Forum (WEF), *Global Gender Gap Report 2011*, Geneva, 2011.

13 | Ibid.

14 | Cf. Table 4: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Gender Inequality Index and related indicators", *Human Development Report 2011. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All*, UNDP and Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2011, 139-142.

THE PHILIPPINE CASE

The Philippines is regarded as an anomaly in a region whose overall performance in gender equality still leaves much to be desired. Having had some form of patriarchy in its pre-colonial past, gender equality in the post-colonial era probably had a less hostile ground on which to grow. Local opposition to Spanish rule saw women rebel leaders – some of whom fought against Spain alongside their husbands – at the forefront of anti-colonial struggle. Others carried on the anti-Spanish struggle after the death of their husbands. An important example is Gabriela Silang, wife of Diego Silang, who took up armed resistance against the Spanish colonial forces in her native Ilocos Norte Province in Northern Philippines after her husband died. This uprising came in the aftermath of the British occupation of Manila following Spanish defeat as an ally of France during the Seven Years War. GABRIELA, the present progressive feminist group in the country, is named after her. A noted figure in the Katipunan, the prime mover of the 1896 Revolution is Melchora Aquino (no relation to the current Philippine president). Already 84 years old when the revolution was launched, she became known as Tandang Sora, Grand Woman of the Revolution. She provided assistance to the revolutionaries including medical attention to the sick and wounded, encouragement, and prayers. Many tributes in her honor are visible in the Philippines, and even in San Francisco, California, USA, where a street bears her name.

Filipino wives as the family's depository of funds including the husband's salary must have strengthened the social status of women in the Philippines. This is symbolically integrated in Filipino weddings where the groom pours several silver or gold coins into the bride's cupped hands while imploring that she manage the family finances well and vowing to provide for the family's material needs. Moreover, by practice and tradition, most Filipino households have mothers as the keeper of family funds including the husband's earnings from which a monthly budget is allocated to the husband. Wives know the amount of their husbands' regular income, but in general are unaware of bonuses and other incomes. Thus, husbands are still able to finance personal interests such as tennis, golf or fishing.

Tradition and Roman Catholicism have bound wives even to philandering husbands in the past. Thanks to a new Family Law that is largely based on Canon Law and was enacted after the end of the Marcos dictatorship in the mid-1980s, discontented couples can avail themselves of an annulment of their marriage and a separation of property for cause. Most of the annulment cases are based on psychological incompatibility. Children from annulled marriages are considered legitimate and entitled to inheritance. Annulment creates the myth that the marriage is void from the start, but even so, it has freed many oppressed and discontented spouses of their marital bondage. A divorce bill is currently being pushed in the lower house of the Philippine legislature. It is seen by many women as the next logical step to annulment.

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In an agricultural economy, the role of women in the farm is incalculable. The Philippines shares this situation with many agricultural societies. Although the economy has been undergoing transformation with manufacturing and new service sectors opening up to women, the latter's old workplaces, such as farms, continue to witness the persistence of gender inequality caused by "the gender division of labour that assigns care of the home and the children to women and because agricultural activities of women are routinely under-reported".¹⁵ It is usually the case that in Filipino households with small farms, women constitute a vast majority of unpaid workers. At the same time, the spread of manufacturing activities into the rural areas reduced the jobs in the agricultural sector, impacting adversely on women agricultural workers.

The country's integration into the global economy has enhanced the economic value of women in the labour force. The global division of labour influenced Filipino labour deployment abroad beginning in the late 1970s-early 1980s originally to the Middle East for massive infrastructure construction amidst that region's revenue from oil exports.¹⁶

15 | Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Paradox and Promise in the Philippines: A Joint Country Gender Assessment*, Asian Development Bank, Manila, 2008, 30.

16 | Cf. e.g. Jorge V. Tigno, "International Migration as State Policy: the Philippine Experience as Model and Myth", *Kasarinlan*, Vol. 6, No. 1-2, 1990, 73-88; "The Politics of International Labor Migration: Philippine Labor Foreign Policy Towards >

The composition of Filipino labor deployed abroad has been changing such that by the 1990s an increasing number of Filipino women were working abroad, including in the Middle East, in Western Europe, and other countries in South-east Asia.¹⁷ Since its initial temporary adoption in the Marcos period, labor deployment has become an institutionalised policy of the Philippine Government.¹⁸ In the Philippines, the remittances migrant workers send home have contributed to the country's economic growth and perhaps saved the Philippine economy from certain foreign exchange crises in the past.¹⁹ For this and other reasons, a new label has even been coined to dignify the status of migrant laborers in the term *Bagong Bayani* (New Hero).²⁰ At the same time, this label recognises the contribution of migrant workers – an increasing number of whom are women – in the country's economy. While they were able to enter the formal sector, they faced enormous challenges both in their host and home countries.

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The plight of Filipino migrant workers in the host country is seen in celebrated cases such as that of Flor Contemplación. She was hanged in Singapore in March 1995 for having killed a fellow domestic worker and the latter's young ward. The case caused a suspension of the diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Singapore, home and host countries of Contemplación respectively. Reports of domestic helpers, mostly women, being subjected to inhumane and/or criminal treatment, including long working

Saudi Arabia (1979-1989)", unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines, 1992.

17 | Cf. e.g. Jorgen Carling, "Gender Dimensions of International Migration", in: *Global Migration Perspectives*, Global Commission on International Migration, 2005.

18 | For an account of the evolution and deregulation of Philippine labor deployment, see Jorge V. Tigno, "Governance and Public Policy in the Philippines: RA 8042 and the Deregulation of the Overseas Employment Sector", unpublished PhD Dissertation, National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines, 2003.

19 | Cf. Alvin Ang, "Workers' Remittances and Economic Growth in the Philippines", paper presented at the 2nd Development Conference of the Economic and Social Research Group (GRES), Bordeaux, 23 Nov 2006.

20 | Cf. Jean Franco, "The Bagong Bayani Discourse: Constituting Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and the Politics of Labor Out-Migration in the Philippines", unpublished PhD Dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines, 2010.

hours, inadequate salaries, physical violence, and rape are common in newspapers especially in the sending countries. At home, they can be victims of domestic violence from suspicious husbands, verbal abuse by in-laws who often care for the migrant workers' children, and insubordination by children no longer used to their mothers' presence in the home.²¹

In the political arena, the Philippines is rather remarkable in Southeast Asia for having ranked among the highest in political empowerment – based on women to men ratio in ministerial-level and parliamentary positions as well as the number of years as president or prime minister – according to the GGG Report 2011. Those in the Asia-Pacific region that ranked higher are Sri Lanka, New Zealand, and Bangladesh. With regard to “Years with Female Head of State” the Philippines was bested only by Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh.²² Since 1986, the Philippines had two women presidents who had served longer than most of their male counterparts, Corazón Aquino from February 1986 to June 1992, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from January 2001 to June 2010.²³

Since the local and national elections of 2010, women hold 22.5 per cent of the seats in the lower house of Congress.

The Philippine Commission on Women reports that the results of the May 2010 national and local elections show that 18.4 per cent of all elected positions were won by women candidates, up from 17 per cent in 2007. Moreover, more women ran for the twelve senatorial positions which two out of 14 women candidates won; women members (65 out of 289) of the lower house of Congress represent 22.5 per cent of its total membership; 14 (25 per cent) out of 56 elected Party-List representatives in the House of Representatives

21 | Cf. e.g. Robyn Rodriguez, “Domestic Insecurities: Female Migration from the Philippines, Development and National Subject-Status”, Working Paper No. 114, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California San Diego, 2005; Hector B. Morada, “Left-Behind Households of Overseas Filipino Workers”, *Philippine Labor Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, Jan-Jun 2003, 118-143.

22 | WEF, n. 12.

23 | Mrs. Aquino governed under a Revolutionary Government from February 1986 until the adoption of the 1987 Constitution that set a six-year term of office for the President, while Mrs. Arroyo served the three years unserved term of the ousted Joseph Estrada (Jan 2001-Jun 2004) and her own six-year term from July 2004 to June 2010.

were women and since 2004, a women's rights organisation (GABRIELA) has been represented as a Party-List member of the House of Representatives; women voter turnout (75.7 per cent) was higher than men (74.4 per cent) and the national average (75 per cent); and the participation of women in the judiciary has been slightly increasing (from 32 per cent in 2007 to 34 per cent in 2010).²⁴

Despite these gender gains in political empowerment, it is still the case, as in other Asian countries, that Filipino women who became chief executives and many of those occupying elective positions in the legislature and local governments acquired political power due to the male politicians with whom they were related either as daughters, wives, or sisters. As an aside, membership in political clans or political dynasties also account for male politicians' success in Philippine elections; although in 1986 and shortly thereafter, a handful of new entrants into political leadership in the country had no political leadership lineage until that time. The current Vice President, Jejomar Binay, for example was a human rights lawyer when appointed by President Corazón Aquino as officer-in-charge of the country's financial capital, Makati City. He has since built his own political clan. Although family ties are applicable to male politicians, it is nevertheless the case that in contemporary Philippines, women in political leadership positions tend to serve as an alter-ego of their male relatives, or convenient vehicles to skirt the country's election laws prohibiting self-succession of incumbent parliamentarians and local government executives. Incidentally, the first Filipino to become a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is a woman.

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Apparently, the Philippines also do very well among countries in the Asia-Pacific region in regard to narrowing the gender gap in the economic dimension. Using data from the WEF GGG Report 2011, a report on women's leadership in Asia ranked the Philippines the highest in the region in terms of narrowing the advancement gap not only among

24 | Philippine Commission on Women, "Women participation in politics and governance", 10 Feb 2012, <http://pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201210/women-participation-politics-and-governance> (accessed 8 Jan 2013).

legislators and senior officials, but also among managers, professional and technical workers.²⁵ However, with regard to the remuneration gap (estimated earned income), it is only tenth out of twelve Asia-Pacific countries for which data was available, although it is fifth in regard to wage equality.²⁶ Drawn from Fortune magazine's list, there is no Filipino woman in the report's figure on Women among Asia's Rich and Powerful.²⁷ In a survey of 12,000 business leaders in 40 economies about women in senior management positions, the wealthy G7 countries fell below the global average, scoring 18 per cent of women holding senior posts. Southeast Asia ranks the highest with 32 per cent of women participation in senior management positions.²⁸ The Philippines and Thailand ranked second in this category where 39 per cent of senior management positions were occupied by women.²⁹

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Despite clear gains in narrowing some aspects of the gender gap, Filipino women share many of the challenges facing women in Asia in general. While women participation in the labour force has been increasing in part due to the shift from agriculture to manufacturing, the increase remains quite low. Moreover, Asian women continue to dominate the informal sector disabling them from formal remuneration and thus, their income and contribution to the economy remain largely unreported. This constrains their access to resources relative to male workers with consequent negative impact on the productivity of female workers. Failure to absorb women into the labour force in the Asia-Pacific region, for example, is said to have cost the regional economy between 542 billion U.S. dollars and 546 billion U.S. dollars annually.³⁰ Gender equality in education and health appears to have enhanced the empowerment

25 | See Tables 10 and 11: Astrid S. Tuminez, *Rising to the Top? A Report on Women's Leadership in Asia*, The Asia Society and the Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) School of Public Policy, New York and Singapore, Apr 2012, 30-31.

26 | See Tables 15 and 16: *ibid.*, 35-36.

27 | *Ibid.*, 38.

28 | As cited *ibid.*, 40-41.

29 | See Fig. 5: *ibid.*, 38

30 | From a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific as cited in: Devasahayam and Mei Hua, n. 6, 3 et seq.

of Southeast Asia's women, including in the Philippines. Yet without policies to remove discriminatory practices against women in the labour force, the benefits of access to education and health by women and girls are not likely to generate the greatest benefits to them.³¹

The rise of political leadership of Asian women, including Filipinas, tends to be related to the careers of male relatives. In South Asia, women chief executives such as India's Indira Gandhi, Bangladesh's Khalida Zia, Sri Lanka's Srivamo Bandaranaike, and Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto benefited from their male relatives who preceded them in political leadership positions in their respective countries. Corazón Aquino became president in 1986 in the heels of her husband's assassination in 1983. He was the country's principal political opponent of the dictator Marcos. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was a daughter of former President Diosdado Macapagal. And South Korea's newly-elected President Park Geun-hye was the daughter of the assassinated strongman Park Chung-hee. Therefore, the challenge for women political empowerment is the achievement of political credentials independently of their male relatives. This has yet to occur in Asia in general and in the Philippines in particular. Putting an end to political dynasties established by male political leaders could be an important beginning in the Philippine case where the constitutional prohibition against political dynasties has yet to be put in place through an enabling legislation.

The role of women in rising economies and promising lands such as the Philippines is changing. It is fairly reasonable to agree with studies in the region showing that the contribution of women in the region's economic growth is considerable. Despite the increase in the participation of women in the economy, including in new and old workplaces (i.e., manufacturing, service, and agricultural sectors), the increase has been modest and incremental. The same trend applies to the rise in the political role of Filipino women which remains tied to that of their male relatives. Policy intervention profusely abundant in extant policy studies on gender equality at all levels of governance is required to narrow or eliminate the gender gap not only in the Philippines, but also worldwide.

31 | *Ibid.*, 2.