

ASEAN Efforts to Improve the Status of Women

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The establishment of ASEAN 40 years ago was an attempt on the part of its members to unite in order to enhance political and economic cooperation and to keep communism at bay. Today, the ASEAN member countries are still focusing on strengthening economic and political infrastructures that, through stability and growth, will lead to social development and a sustainable livelihood for the 500 million people spread across 4.5 million square kilometres of ASEAN.¹ The ASEAN members have been introducing and enhancing measures to develop the potential of men and women and to promote gender equality. This chapter first assesses the status of women in Southeast Asia. It then focuses on the efforts made at the ASEAN level to enhance the status of women. Finally, it identifies the challenges which the ASEAN members must overcome in this area.

The Status of Women

There is clear progress in the development of women, compared to the situation forty years ago when access to education and healthcare was remote to most women in ASEAN. This is borne out by the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI shows that most ASEAN countries are ranked “medium” in progress, with the exception of Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, which are at the “high” end.² The data shows that there have been greater access to education, an increase in life expectancy and an improvement in maternal mortality rates (MMR).³

Yet the HDI only tells half the story. To look at women’s progress, one needs to focus on the details through gender-disaggregated data. For example, the adult literacy figures alone show that the ASEAN countries have overlooked the human potential of its female population. Women trail men by a difference of between 2.9 and 21.8 percentage points in literacy, with the exception of the Philippines, in which men trail women by 1.4

percentage points.⁴ Women also fall behind in other fields, such as healthcare, access to employment, wages, work hours and the holding of leadership positions (see Table 1). In addition, land rights and access to credit and information technology are not easily available to women. Rural women and the urban poor remain most vulnerable to abuse, violence, illnesses and diseases.

Table 1: Selected indicators for economic, professional and political participation⁵

Country	Labour force participation rate (aged 15–64 years)		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
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	—	—

Table 2: Gender-related development index⁶

Ranking	Country	GDI (highest: 1)
51	Malaysia	0.795
58	Thailand	0.781
66	Philippines	0.761

80	Vietnam	0.708
81	Indonesia	0.704
97	Cambodia	0.578
100	Laos	0.545
NA	Singapore	NA
NA	Brunei	NA
NA	Myanmar	NA

Another useful indicator for gauging women's progress is the Gender Development Indices. The data shows stark disparities in the development of women across ASEAN (see Table 2).⁷ The Gender Empowerment Measurement (GEM), which measures the participation of women in decision-making, is a stronger indicator of the status of women. The GEM reveals the poor presentation of women in top positions, even in the more developed ASEAN member countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.⁸ For example, female representation in Parliament in Laos PDR is 22.9 per cent while the figures in the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia do not exceed 19%.⁹ Though recent statistics show an increase in female representation in Parliament, the figures are still below 30 per cent—a threshold recommended by the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995, the signatories of which include the ASEAN countries.

In sum, there are still gaps between men and women in leadership positions, economic participation and culture. Two forces—globalization and the migration of labour—may stand to derail the efforts within ASEAN to close the gender gap, as will be argued later. The next section will focus on efforts made by the ASEAN members to enhance the status of women.

ASEAN's Efforts

The first ASEAN meeting in which the issues of women were tabled was in Jakarta in 1981. In this meeting, each country agreed to set up a clearinghouse to document, analyse and disseminate data, and to appoint a national agency as a focal point to coordinate policies. These focal points were within government organs, such as the Ministry of

Social Affairs or Community Affairs, or within civil society organizations such as women's organizations.¹⁰

In 1988, ASEAN went one step further and signed the Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region. The Declaration set out several goals, including 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 and education; and the development of national programmes and legislation to protect abused women.¹¹ Four years later, the ASEAN members agreed to operationalize the Declaration and, seven years later, in 1995, a monitoring-and-reporting mechanism was adopted.

Issues concerning the rights of women also featured in the 1998 Hanoi Plan of Action and in the 2004 Vientiane Action Programme. In 2004, all ten ASEAN members signed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region and the Declaration Against Trafficking of Women and Children. The Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative (COMMIT), a multi-stakeholder network in combating trafficking, became an action plan for the Greater Mekong sub-region. There is also an ASEAN Regional Programme on Women and Skills Training, formed in 2000. Other action plans—on HIV/AIDS, transnational crime, rural development and poverty eradication—also have mechanisms aimed at improving conditions for men and women within ASEAN. In addition, the ASEAN Committee of Women (ACW), comprising ministers and government representatives, acts as a focal point for G-to-G discussions on gender matters. The ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organizations (ACWO) brings together civil society actors in the region.¹²

There are also multilateral and bilateral agreements between ASEAN and other agencies to improve the status of women in Southeast Asia. One example is the memorandum of understanding signed in 2006 between ASEAN and the United Nations Development Fund for Women's East and Southeast Asia Regional Office, which commits both organizations to actively involve more women in the social, economic and political spheres. The ASEAN countries have also adopted the Beijing Platform of Action, and most of them 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

What are the challenges for the ASEAN members? There are at least four crucial tasks to address: (i) the harmonization of monitoring mechanisms; (ii) the promotion of the rights of migrant workers; (iii) the safeguarding of the economic plight of women in a globalizing economy; and (iv) the provision of clean water and other basic amenities.

Monitoring Mechanisms

The report card so far, as discussed earlier in this chapter, shows that there is still much work that needs to be done to improve the status of women. The last two decades have been exemplary in terms of the development of women. Development programmes have become better structured, with universal goals and common indicators at the United Nations level. The new goalpost set in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) will soon overtake the Beijing Platform for Action, which was solely dedicated to the development of women. These changing goalposts underline the need for ASEAN to harmonize the Monitoring Mechanism on the Declaration for the Advancement of Women with other international instruments used for various phenomenon.

Migration and Trafficking

More women are leaving their homes and families to work in other countries and to become offshore breadwinners. Southeast Asia is the main arena in this phenomenon, as a large number of the female migrant labour force comes from this region. They take up jobs as domestic workers, healthcare workers, frontline service staff and sex workers. The 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers is a way forward in protecting the rights of workers although, to date, its implementation plans remain vague. The operational, monitoring and reporting plans of this Declaration need to accord the same protection and rights to all workers, irrespective of the ASEAN country she or he chooses to work in.

There is also an increase in the volume of tourists travelling in the region, mainly due to the availability of low-cost budget travel. More women in Southeast Asia have been lured to the sex industry due to poverty or ignorance. They have also been risking contracting HIV. The ASEAN Secretariat has spearheaded a campaign to raise the awareness of HIV among travel operators. However, the enforcement of the measures stipulated in the Declaration Against Trafficking of Women and Children remains weak.

Globalization

Economic competition through globalization has both opened opportunities and created problems for micro-enterprises and small-and-medium enterprises. Shrinking markets for certain products means unemployment. The shutting down of micro-enterprises means more rural women are without a basic income. The integration of ASEAN economies on certain products is crucial to stave off competition and keep women and men employed. The impact of globalization has also increased the movement of people looking for jobs—from rural to urban set-ups or across borders. Women continue to run the greater risk of being easily trafficked into markets where they are exploited—doing much more for lower wages.

Access to Basic Amenities

Access to education, clean water and sanitation is a burden that women still carry more than men. ASEAN's water management policy is important because this issue is trans-border in nature. Developmental projects can affect livelihoods as well as turn rivers into infection carriers. The Mekong River, for example, sustains livelihoods for populations in China, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia. More focused models such as COMMIT can be useful in preventive work and in educating women on the cleanliness of water and the acquisition of skills for alternative livelihoods.

Conclusion

As ASEAN turns forty, it is important to note that the association has introduced initiatives to develop women's potential and to bridge the gender gap. Nevertheless, ASEAN can still introduce a Temporary Special Measure at the regional level that

focuses on elevating the status of women in the various areas of concern. As ASEAN works its way towards the ASEAN Charter, it is important to note that the vast majority of women within the ASEAN family are still in a subordinate position compared to men. The ASEAN Way needs to become one of enforcement and implementation if ASEAN is to advance the status of women and to level the playing field with men.

¹ Alberto G. Romulo, "Speech on ASEAN Day 2007", 8 August 2007.

² The HDI of Singapore is 0.916—out of 1 as the highest score—and Lao PDR, the lowest ranked ASEAN country, has a score of 0.553. United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2006, pp. 263–280.

³ The ASEAN Secretariat, "Gender Dimensions of Globalisation and Regional Integration," Third Report on the Advancement of Women in ASEAN, 2007, p. 11.

⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, Third Regional Report, 2007, pp. 21–23.

⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, Third Regional Report, 2007, p. 29.

⁶ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2006, pp. 363–370.

⁷ All data related to HDI, GDI and GEM need to be treated with caution in comparative analyses across countries because of the limitations in terms of their consistency. 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.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2006, p. 367.

⁹ ASEAN Secretariat, Third Regional Report, p. 29, 2007.

¹⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, "Clearinghouses on Women in Development," ASEAN's Women's Programme, 1994.

¹¹ The five goals became indicator markers on this ASEAN road map on the Advancement of Women in ASEAN Secretariat, A Regional Report, 1996.

¹² On November 20th, 1981, ACWO was formally established, comprising the National Council of Women's Organizations in each ASEAN member country.