



NTS ALERT

Being Heard on International Women’s Day 2007

8th March marked International Women’s Day (IWD) - an occasion commemorated at the United Nations and by women's groups around the world. Some countries also designate IWD as a national holiday. While women worldwide vary in their ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political backgrounds and are divided by national boundaries, 8th March marks a day of coming together to celebrate and look back to a tradition that represents at least nine decades of struggle for equality, justice, peace and development. This section takes a look at how IWD had been commemorated in some selected countries throughout Asia.

In *Malaysia*, women marked their achievements in many areas but were uniformly worried over a sharp rise in gender related violence – especially rape and domestic abuse. According to Irene Fernandez, Head of TENAGANITA, a leading human rights organization in Malaysia, reported incidences of violence against women are only the tip of the iceberg as many cases go unreported due to a conservative value system that pervades in Malaysian society.

The Malaysian government, too, is alarmed by statistics which show that 6.6 women are raped everyday and thus encourages victims to come forward and report so as to ensure that the perpetrators are punished. Shahrizat Jalil, Malaysia’s minister for women, family and community development noted that the number of rape cases in the country had doubled in the last six years, from 1,217 in 2000 to 2,341 in 2006. Most victims, she added were below 15 years old and agreed that the abuse of women was often concealed as women themselves were ignorant

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of their rights or were mistakenly acting in accordance with cultural practices.

“For too long, women who were beaten up or violated felt that they were in the wrong... They are accepting it as a stereotype, as part of the culture of this country,” Shahrizat said. “It is not. I want to say very clearly – violence has never been a culture in this country,” she added.

Women’s groups also used the occasion to demand stern legislation against what they describe as a “little understood” form of violence – marital rape. Human rights activists however argue that the law is inadequate because marital rape is not considered as a crime in Malaysia and fails to recognize the complexities.

Besides rape, the incidences of domestic violence have also increased year-on-year. Executive director of the All Women’s Action Society or AWAM, Honey Tan Lay Ean, noted that while there are shortcomings, the situation has been aggravated by political and religious leaders whose attitude towards women is patronizing at best and repressive at worst. She cited the demands from Islamists that women wear chastity belts to protect their virginity, to set up snoop squads to spy on courting couples and punish undergraduates who they claim were promiscuous.

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There was also the call for protecting female migrant workers from violence. With nearly three million migrant workers from impoverished neighbouring countries, Fernandez notes that they are the most vulnerable group in Malaysia as they are constantly at the mercy of the uniformed authorities, in 2006 alone, TENAGANITA handled more than 200 cases of violence against women migrant workers. According to the United Nations and Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, Malaysia has emerged as a major centre for trafficked women from across Asia and as a transit point to receiving countries in Europe.

In *Bangladesh*, the need to resist Muslim fundamentalism in addressing women's rights is considered a more critical issue. A cultural event, amongst many other programmes during the day), centred around the theme of 'No politics in the name of religion'. Rights activist and former adviser to caretaker government Sultana Kamal noted that the future of women's leadership in politics is very bright given Bangladesh's history in politics including the Liberation War. However, she added that this bright potential could be hindered if fundamentalism and militancy were not curbed. There was a need to do away with patriarchal mentalities so as to ensure a democratic and non-communal society where all Bangladeshis would enjoy equal rights and opportunity as provided by the constitution.

In another event, a human chain was formed in a bid to raise awareness on women's reproductive health and other rights. The Population Services and Training Centre (PSTC) organised a discussion attended by the representatives of various NGOs in Bangladesh, including *Ain O Shalish Kendra*, *Bangladesh Mahila Samity*, *Hunger Free World*, *Water Aid Bangladesh* and *Manusher Jonno Foundation*. Presenting a keynote at the discussion, PSTC Advocacy Officer Ahmed Mushfika Naznin noted that 87 per cent of mothers fail to receive adequate support from doctors and 70 per cent of women suffer from various diseases and malnutrition.

In *China*, legal scholars such as Li Mingshun, professor of law and vice-president of Beijing's China Women's University, have urged the government to improve laws to better protect women's rights and further eliminate discrimination. Li made these remarks when the UN, together with the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) announced a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the struggle for gender equality. The campaign, slated to last for three years, will allow women and men to become familiar with the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Li also added that the CEDAW, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, clearly defines the term "discrimination against women". However, the definition has not been incorporated into Chinese laws, even though China ratified it in 1980. Besides technical difficulties during the drafting of the legislation, traditional stereotypes (against women) that exist both in mind and action have prevented the legislation process from adopting the international convention.

He added that the public still lacks a clear recognition of the standing and effectiveness of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women, promulgated in 1992 and revised in 2005. "People tend to ignore this statute and they believe that it cannot serve as the legal base for the judiciary and law enforcement agencies," he said.

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Women and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Much has been done to advance the status of women. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are to be achieved by 2015, dedicates 2 of its goals explicitly to women i.e. promoting gender equality and improving maternal health. Other goals such as combating HIV/AIDS implicitly place emphasis on women. Based on the UN's MDG Report for 2006, this section highlights the progress done so far within 3 Asian regions in meeting the MDGs pertaining specifically to women.

Ensuring Primary Education

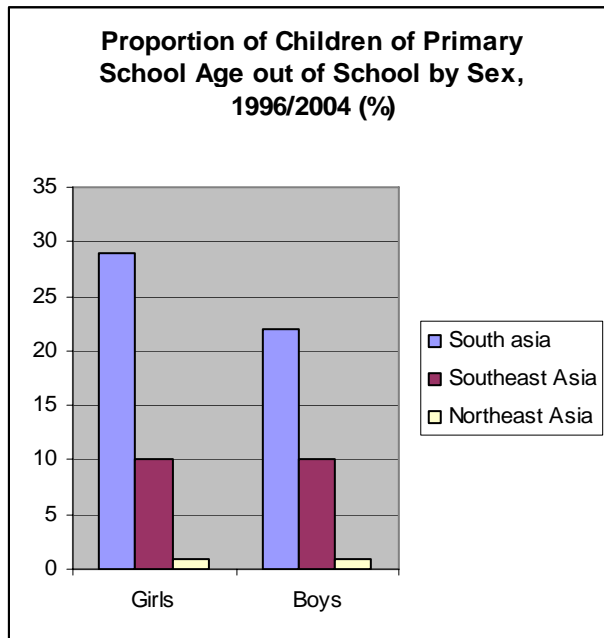


Table 1
Source: UN MDG Report 2006

As seen from Table 1, South Asia continues to lag behind East Asia in ensuring primary education for all. This is essentially due to the fact that much of those children out of school live in rural areas. Based on household surveys in 80 developing countries, 30 per cent of rural children of primary-school age do not attend school, compared to 18 per cent in urban areas. And because rural areas have larger populations of children, they account for 82 per cent of children who are not in school in developing countries.

UN Millennium Development Goals

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions. They have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest.

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) Achieve universal primary education
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) Reduce child mortality
- 5) Improve maternal health
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7) Ensure environmental stability
- 8) Develop a global partnership for development

Source
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

There are several problems associated with providing greater education opportunities to those children living in remote, rural areas of developing countries. One of these is the high rates of poverty, which force more children to seek employment so as to assist in providing income for their families. Their parents, often with low levels of education themselves, therefore do not see the necessity of education, given that school fees would only be an additional burden on the family.

There is also the issue of lack of access to good quality schooling, which further reinforces parents' belief that education is useless. A high quality of education is vital in order to sustain students' attendance and performance in school. To do this, the quality of teachers must be addressed.

On the latter, many developing states such as those in South Asia, witness a trend in teacher absenteeism. Gazdar (2000) notes that poor salary rates coupled with the lack of training and solid rules in the





education system reduces teachers' incentive to work, which ultimately reduces students' performance in school and increases apathy amongst parents in sending their children to school. During a school inspection in Lahore, for instance, only 96 out of the 125 schools inspected were open and only half of the 96 could be classified as fully functional.

Mothers' illiteracy and lack of schooling directly disadvantage their young children. Low schooling translates into poor quality of care for children and then higher infant and child mortality and malnutrition. Mothers with more education are more likely to adopt appropriate health-promoting behaviours, such as having young children immunized. As with mothers' schooling, higher household income is associated with higher child survival rates and better nutrition.

Promoting Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

With regards to employment opportunities, while improvements have been made across Asia, South Asia still trails in the proportion of women in the non-agricultural workforce (see Table 2). This again, has much to do with the vast rural population as well as static notions of women's role in society. Even in this day and age, the women's place in some regions is still confined to the domestic realm. Employment policies reflect these attitudes hence further limit women's options for balancing work and family responsibilities. For instance, many women in South Asia still do not have access to birth control methods to manage the timing and spacing of births, which make it difficult for them to contribute fully in the workforce.

According to a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) released on International Women's day in 2007, women make up 60% of the world's working poor, earning less than \$1 a day. This statistic reflects that women are one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Women also suffer from discrimination and inequality. The report went on to note that whatever jobs women do, they earn, on average, 10% less than men. Despite the general increases of women in the workforce, they still face discrimination over salaries, job security and promotion.



Table 2
Source: UN MDG Report 2006

Nonetheless, the picture is not all that bleak if one looks at development in other regions. According to an international survey done by Grant Thornton International Business Report, 97 percent of businesses in the Philippines have women in senior management positions, the highest among the 32 countries surveyed. The results for the Philippines, released by Grant Thornton member firm Punongbayan & Araullo (P&A), represented a 13-percent increase from 2004, and were significantly higher than the global average of 59 percent.

The survey canvassed opinions among 7,200 privately held firms in 32 countries, representing 81 percent of global gross domestic product. The survey involved face-to-face interviews among 150 companies in the Philippines. It was limited to owner-managed companies employing between 100 and 500 people. It did not say anything about the size of the assets of the companies.

The survey also showed that 50 percent of people holding senior management positions in Philippine companies were women, compared to the global average of just 22 percent. There was just 39 percent two years ago.

Following the Philippines on the rankings were Mainland China with 91 percent; Malaysia, 85

percent; Brazil, 83 percent; Hong Kong, 83 percent; Thailand, 81 percent; Taiwan, 80 percent; South Africa, 77 percent; Botswana, 74 percent and Russia, 73 percent. At the bottom of the list was Japan, which despite its high levels of economic development in the region, only 25 percent of businesses had women in top positions. Also ranked low were Western states such as the Netherlands, 27 percent; Luxembourg, 37 percent; Germany, 41 percent and Italy, 42 percent.

Similar results were also noted in the MasterCard Master Index of Women's Advancement for 2007, where the Philippines posted the highest index score of 87.43 among Asian countries included in the survey. Taiwan followed with 82.19; Singapore, 75.92; Hong Kong, 75.83; China, 75.59; Thailand, 75.29; Vietnam, 72.18; Korea, 65.12; Indonesia, 61.09 and Malaysia, 57.91. Japan brought up the rear with an index score of 46.93 percent.

The index scores measure, among other things, how optimistic women are about holding managerial positions and how they feel about their place in the workforce. A score of 100 indicates equality between the sexes. Last year, the Philippines had the highest index score of 90.9. It dipped to 87.43 this year, but it was still enough for the Philippines to rank first in Asia.

What these surveys suggest is that gender equality and empowering of women is possible even without economic development. What is needed is essentially a change in cultural mindsets. Filipinos credit their success in the surveys to their matriarchal norms in society. According to Lily Linsangan, P&A's first female partner and head of the firm's Business Risk Services Group, the mother is regarded very highly in Filipino society and her influence is felt, from the way the children are disciplined to the way the household is run. As a result, her children would move on to the business world and become professionals and carry with them that respect for women. Such respect coupled with support from their extended families, allows women executives in the Philippines to combine work with family commitments and thereby giving women more flexibility in pursuing both working and domestic lifestyles.

With regards to political representation by women, South and Southeast Asia noted significant increase in

the proportion of women in political positions since 1990. Northeast Asia, however, experienced a slight decline (see Table 3). According to Zou Xiaoqiao, director-general of department of international affairs of All China Women's Federation, greater attention needs to be paid to women's participation in government-level decision-making as the ratio of female leaders in diplomatic and management positions in the government has remained low.

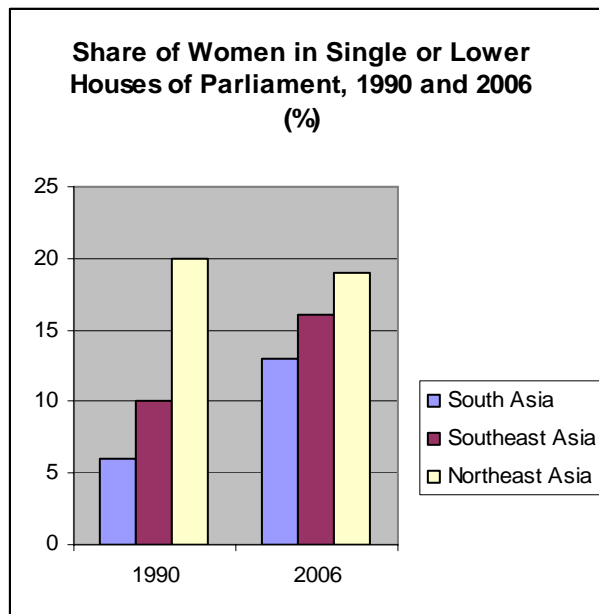


Table 3
Source: UN MDG Report 2006

There have been also been calls for a change in mindsets to allow more women participation at the policy-making level. In Bangladesh, for instance, Women and Children Affairs Adviser Geeti Ara Safiya Choudhury has called upon policy makers and media owners to change their attitude towards women journalists, whose contribution can be substantial, and to “recognise their full dignity as professionals.”

Improving Maternal Health

Though the issue of maternal health has been high on the international agenda for two decades, ratios of maternal mortality seem to have changed little in regions where most deaths occur (sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia). According to the Asian Development Bank's Statistics in 2000, out of 100,000 live births, the maternal mortality rate was 500 in Pakistan, 540 in India and 700 in Nepal. Other countries in the Asian





region also recorded relatively high maternal mortality rates – 450 in Cambodia and 200 in the Philippines. In light of these statistics, adequate reproductive health services and family planning are essential in improving maternal health and reducing maternal mortality. Even so, some 200 million women worldwide who wish to space or limit pregnancies lack access to medical care and facilities.

Combating HIV

While focus is often given to Africa due to its high incidence of HIV positive cases, more awareness should also be raised in Asia, in particular amongst women caught in the sex trade and are thus most vulnerable to contracting HIV.

The case of trafficking in Thailand is perhaps the most instructive example for the changes in the nature and extent of the problem. Though not a new phenomenon, trafficking became an issue of serious concern in the 1980s, under the influence of the booming sex sector, sex tourism child prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Whereas at the time girls and women were recruited from the poorer Thai provinces for commercial sex work, this pattern was somewhat replaced in the 1990s by the trafficking of women and children from neighbouring Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and the Yunnan province of China. Hence, the growing transnational nature of the problem deems the spread of HIV much more.

Apart from facilitating economic development and widening the scope of employment opportunities, education would also provide women with the means of protecting themselves from other societal threats. According to UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman, education is a key to addressing discrimination and violence against girls. Educated girls would be better equipped to protect themselves against life-threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS, are more likely to give birth to healthy babies who will survive and grow into adulthood, tend to delay marriage, and are more likely to have fewer children.

Human rights NGOs in Southeast Asia have extensively documented the plight of trafficked women for prostitution who are physically assaulted and raped multiple times by different men and by traffickers. The research showed that trafficked women are often forced to consume drugs and alcohol

and become dependent users with severe health and psychological problems.

Hence, in order to combat HIV in Asia, other socio-economic issues must also be addressed, in particular improved labour migration legislation that puts the safety of the migrant as the main priority and increasing education and employment opportunities for women so that they need not resort to prostitution.

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