

ASEAN Leaders' Meeting with the Representatives of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 2 April 2012

Gender Development in ASEAN

The next level of economic performance of our nations needs the maximization of all available resources, natural and human.

In 2007, the Goldman Sachs report concluded that closing the gap between male & female employment would add 9% to US GDP, 13% to European GDPs and 16% to Japan's GDP.

While statistics for ASEAN nations are not available to me, we would probably be following this trend of GDP improvement.

Helen Clark, 37th Prime Minister of New Zealand and current Administrator of the United Nations Development Fund diagnosed that:

" Investing in gender equity is catalytic for development.Providing a woman with just one year of additional education means that her children will be less likely to die in infancy or suffer from illness or hunger. The inter-generational benefits go further still as a mother's education significantly affects her children's education attainments and opportunities. The flow-on effects will also include reduction of child and maternal mortality, better child nutrition, a boost to economies, and a greater ability to protect women and girls from HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation."

While more girls are enrolling in education in the ASEAN region - in compliance with the Education For All (EFA) Goals by 2015 in ASEAN Member States set forth at the Fourth ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting in Phuket in 2009 - males in the ASEAN countries are still generally more literate than females and girls and women provided with fewer educational and training opportunities. As such, women and men have unequal opportunities to improve their individual well-being and assume greater economic, social and political roles in society.

In Singapore, the female participation in the labour force has risen quite significantly over the years. Women's participation in the labour force saw an increase in 2010 as a record 71.7% of women in the prime working ages of 25 to 54 years were economically active. The total percentage of female labour force participation at present is 56.5% According to the 2005 Household Survey conducted by the Department of Statistics, the strong increase in female participation rates has been largely due to the increased tendency of married females to remain or rejoin the workforce.

From women's groups feedback main factors in female labour force participation are:

-Fair pay, fair opportunities

-Parent-friendly workplace practices i.e.

- flexible working arrangements
- parental leave/family illness leave

- Childcare facilities- high quality, flexible and affordable to be both an employer and government priority

- Family creation to be promoted as dual roles of responsibility and investment of both parents

- Work Life Harmony

The single most outstanding encouragement to women, especially those in the early work-age group to enter and stay on in employment is the assurance that they will be fairly appreciated, in both financial and social terms. Singapore has built its economy on the principles of meritocracy, and the rewarding of ability. This does, generally, translate into wage and promotion policies that are not gender sensitive, but there is still a gender wage disparity to be looked at.

With regards to determining whether to have children, and if so, how many and still remain in the workforce, are how the family can arrange work and home life to run as smoothly as possible, to be successful both as a working person, and a parent.

In this regard, women felt that the roles of husbands and fathers was an important contributory factor, especially in determining the number of children. The assurance of the long-term security of the marriage, financial resources and childcare facilities available were high on the list of factors. Family Creation should be the goal, not just policies aimed at procreation.

In the SCWO Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee in July 2011, SCWO reported on key issues of progress made since the previous reporting 2007. Areas which we highlighted as key issues to progress were:

- Measures to improve the protection of older women from economic and social marginalization and abuse, including addressing gender disparity in retirement incomes,
- Acceleration of the promotion of female Parliamentarians to ministerial appointments
- Enable more gender diversity in high level positions in Government, Boards of public organisations and private companies
- Implement skills upgrading and training policies for women with targeted interventions for disadvantaged groups including elderly and disabled to keep pace with the information age to maintain independence and functionality
- Improved Healthcare for women at different stages of life

Conclusion

Research and reports highlight the importance of women in economic development. Moreover, women are estimated to be responsible for 70% of household purchasing decisions, which from a corporate viewpoint, underlines the importance of their opinions as consumers, producers, managers and directors as valuable input. McKinsey & Company 2010 report showed that companies with strong female representation at board and top management level perform better than those without. In terms of Return on Equity, the top quartile group exceeds by 41% the group with no women, and in terms of operating results, the more gender diverse companies exceeded by 56% the group with no women.

While gender-based disparities impede socio-economic growth and development, it is crucial that the governments of the ASEAN community formulate and implement appropriate policies to enhance the productivity and well-being of their entire population, including women. This is to ensure financial and social returns individually, nationally and regionally.

As the World Bank's president, Robert Zoellick, points out "Equality is not just the right thing to do. It's smart economics. How can an economy achieve full potential if it ignores, sidelines, or fails to invest in half its population?"

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