

Gender Equality in East Asia: Progress, and the Challenges of Economic Growth and Political Change

Introduction

This special focus looks at the track record of progress on women's empowerment in East Asia especially in the context of the evolving economic and political environment. The paper coincides with the ten-year anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women and focuses on changes since then, within the context of broad trends over the last forty years. Since the 1960s many East Asian countries have invested heavily in human development and have reaped the benefits in terms of economic growth and improved social indicators. Aggregate regional indicators show the dramatic improvements in the health and education of women that have occurred over the last forty years. (Table 1).³⁴

Table 1: East Asia. Human Development Indicators³⁵

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Life expectancy at birth, female (years)	40	60	66	69	71
Fertility rate (births per woman)	4	6	3	2	2
Literacy rate, adult female ages 15 and above (%)		43	58	72	86
Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births)	134	85	56	43	34

Source: World Development Indicators (2004)

It is now widely accepted that gender inequalities hinder development, while increasing gender equality helps foster it. The relationship also runs the other way, so that income growth and economic development also bring broad new opportunities for women and contribute to improving gender equality. East Asia's efforts to reduce gender inequality and to promote development since the 1960s have clearly reinforced each other, contributing to its successes in both areas. (World Bank, 2001).

³⁴ The paper draws heavily on gender assessments prepared by the World Bank and/or ADB in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, supplemented with information on other countries from UN, ILO and other sources. Due to space limitations, the paper touches upon most of the 12 areas mentioned in the Beijing Platform of Action (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/plat1.htm>), but does not try to deal with each in depth. Similarly, because of space limitations and the absence of consistent data series, the paper refers to MDGs where possible, but does not address the gender aspects of all of them comprehensively (see <http://www.developmentgoals.org/>).

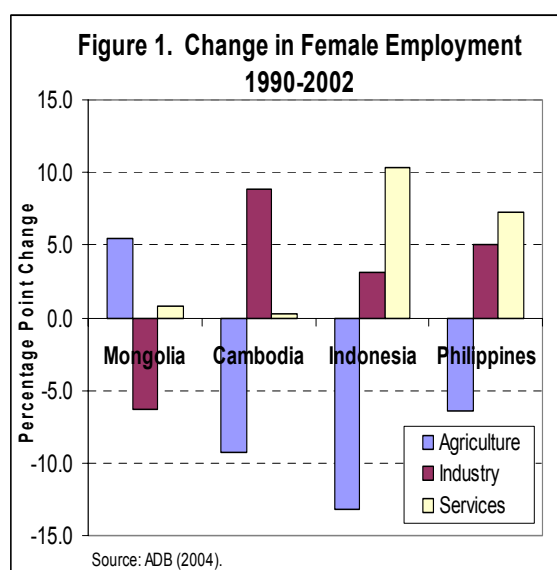
³⁵ The economies included in East Asia and Pacific regional aggregate are: American Samoa, Cambodia, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Kiribati, Korea, Dem. Rep., Lao PDR, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Fed. Sts., Mongolia, Myanmar, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Vietnam.

However, despite progress, persistent inequalities remain and new challenges continue to unfold. Drawing on the wealth of gender-related material that has become available in the last decade, and using a select set of indicators as a proxy for women's status, this paper attempts to highlight some of the advances that East Asia has made in closing the gender gap, extract some evolving common trends, and draw attention to both old and new challenges for gender equality in five areas: participation in the economy, health care, education, representation in decision making, and legal and institutional mechanisms. It tries to identify for government, civil society, and development agencies where there is still "low-hanging fruit" to be picked in terms of reducing gender gaps, and some of the structural changes that need to be made to address the tougher challenges.

Participation in the Economy

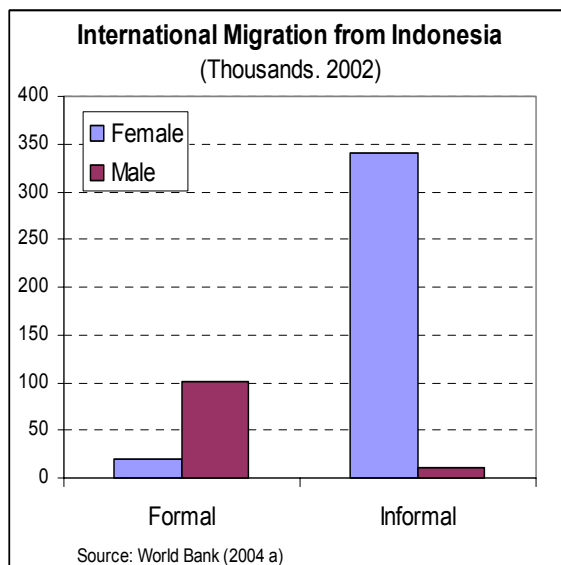
Narrowing the Gap: the Road since Beijing

Any analysis of changes in women's participation in the economy since Beijing needs to be set against the backdrop of the main economic changes in the region and their impact on women. The rapid economic growth of the 1980s and early 1990s came to an abrupt halt during the East Asia financial crisis in 1997/1998. But most countries have recovered and are back on the growth trajectory, with greater openness of markets and investment, and substantial moves towards regional integration.



The number of working women worldwide is today at its highest ever, a record 1.1 billion female workers, representing a 22 percent increase over the last 10 years (ILO 2004). Much of this increase has taken place in

regions with high growth rates such as East Asia, where demand for labor has increased and where women have traditionally participated in the workforce. The vast majority of the East Asian female workforce is still in agriculture, although the trend in most countries is for women to move out of agriculture and into manufacturing and services (Figure 1). Official statistics in China show that 40 percent of the 7 million new workers hired in China's export processing zones in the last few years have been women (Cooke 2001). In Cambodia, 84 percent of the over 200,000 garment industry workers are women (UNIFEM et al, 2004). Similarly, in the Philippines, female employment soared with the growth of the service sector and export industries in the 1990s.



Labor migration has also increased dramatically, both internally from rural to urban areas, but also international migration. Governments have been quick to see the opportunities for exporting labor, and the economic benefits of remittances. Twenty million Asian migrant workers worked outside their home countries in 2000 – the same year that migrant workers sent home \$6 billion to the Philippines, and \$1 billion to Indonesia (World Bank 2004c). Cambodia's female garment workers are estimated to support 1.5 million people on their remittances (Phav 2005). The majority of the workers are female, and in the informal sector, as illustrated by the 2002 figures for Indonesia presented in Figure 2.

There is no doubt that all of these new labor force opportunities have brought improvements in economic benefits and social indicators for women, as well as in their perceived roles. However, it is a rapidly evolving situation in which gaps and discrimination persist, while new challenges are also emerging:

Time Poverty. Women's dual roles at work and in the home remain a major challenge. For example in Vietnam, the hours worked increased between 1993 and 1998 for both men and women, but more so for women, who identified disproportionately heavy workloads as one of their key problems (World Bank, 2000). Between their income-generating and household work, women's working day is now 6-8 hours longer than men's (ADB 2002). A reduction of social services in Mongolia – such as the 50 percent reduction in the number of preschools and kindergartens between 1989 and 1998 – has shifted the burden of care to women, reducing their opportunities to enter formal employment (ADB & WB 2004).

Labor Mobility Vulnerabilities and Trafficking. Labor migration is associated with increasing vulnerabilities for women, including trafficking, violence and sub-normal working conditions. Migrants' income is often significantly reduced when they are forced to pay illegal fees to agents, facilitators and immigration authorities. Women enter informal services such as domestic work, or commercial sex industry more than men, and are more vulnerable to isolation, abuse and trafficking, particularly in East Asia, which accounts for one third of the global trafficking trade. Increased female migration alters gender relations, often causing disruption within the family, with adverse consequences for children. Efforts are underway to better understand and mitigate the impact of these vulnerabilities. The Philippines has initiatives to raise awareness of female workers before departure. Indonesia and Thailand are looking at ways to provide services in embassies in receiving countries. Other activities seek to sensitize agents to the rights of female workers, and help to ensure that remittances are protected and used well in the women's absence.

Work Vulnerability and Bargaining Constraints. Too often, labor codes in female-dominated manufacturing industries are poorly adhered to or waived. In the Philippines, workers in the female-dominated EPZs are often exposed to difficult working conditions, without recourse to collective bargaining. In Guangdong, women in garment factories – many without social insurance or written contracts – put in 150 hours of monthly overtime (OXFAM 2004) and are seldom in a position to negotiate with employers. Because of women's disproportionate presence in many of East Asia's growth industries, the vulnerability that is associated with these sectors takes on a gender dimension.

Job and Income Insecurity. Market competition and the shrinking of public social services in transition economies can leave women increasingly vulnerable to job and income insecurity. According to a recent survey, the new contractual arrangements that many Chinese women hold are increasingly constraining them to make a choice between job security and their reproductive role (ILO

2004a). A survey conducted in China's Shanxi province found that one fifth of women workers had suffered job losses in some regions and industries, with childbearing responsibilities listed as one of the main reasons for the layoffs (Cooke 2001). To offset income insecurity and wage gaps, many women in Vietnam are forced to take on multiple jobs, with almost a quarter of women being both self-employed and engaged in wage work (ADB 2002).

The Sticky Floor and Occupational Stereotypes. Women's employment in labor-intensive and low-skill industries such as the garment sector can relegate them to a narrow circle of industries and occupations that are typically seen as appropriate for women, perpetuating cultural stereotypes, limiting upward mobility, and undermining educational attainment. In the Philippines, for instance, the electronics industry is highly segmented by gender; women are in predominantly production operator positions that offer little career mobility while men are engineers and technicians – this despite the country's high proportion of female graduates (ADB 2004b).

Changes in Gender Relations and Power Dynamics. A study in Vietnam found that that domestic abuse is greatest in households where the woman is the main income earner (World Bank 2000). In Cambodia, where the formal sector offers women more opportunities than men, there is concern that feelings of disempowerment among young men are increasingly translating into violence towards women.

Closing the Gap: the Road Forward

Quick wins in agriculture. Growing employment opportunities in manufacturing and services should not eclipse women's disproportionate presence in agriculture. Better inclusion in agriculture programs, and increasing women's access to land, credit and markets would have immediate returns in terms of poverty reduction, increased food security and better health and nutrition for families. It is arguably one of the most effective measures to help countries meet the MDG on reducing poverty and hunger.

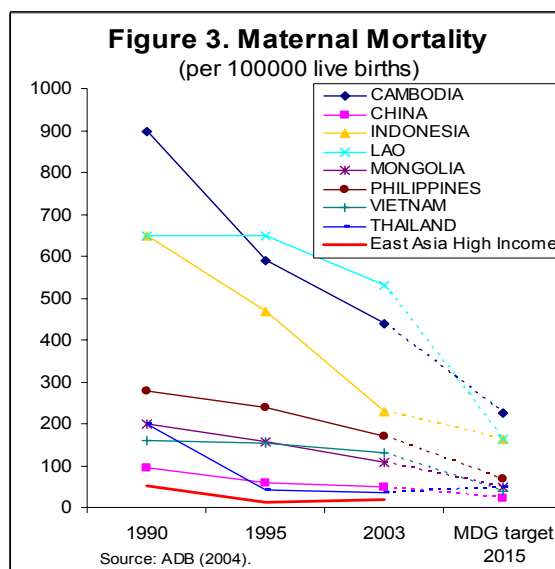
Better protection for workers, especially migrants. Improved policies on cross-border labor flows are becoming more important as the region integrates. Programs are needed to help educate migrants about risks before they leave home, provide protection in receiving countries, or help them get legal help if their rights are abused. Better support for the implementation of the relevant labor codes in factories will become increasingly important, as is the need to strengthen women's participation in unions.

Support for women in business. Women are increasingly business owners, the majority small and micro entrepreneurs. Amongst the challenges they face are inadequate access to credit, financial services,

communications and information, as well as lack of required business or financial skills. Efforts are needed to support women entrepreneurs, including through access to small loans, markets, and training.

The Social Sectors: Equality in Access to Health Care

Narrowing the Gap: the Road since Beijing

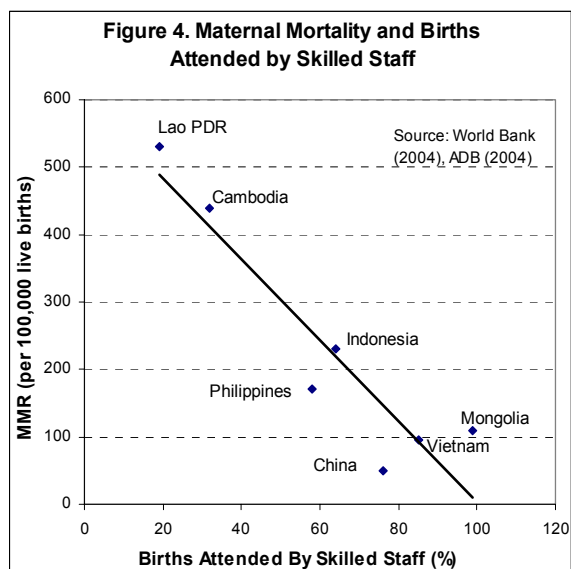


Health needs are different for males and females, and vary throughout the lifecycle, starting before birth. Infant and child mortality data in most countries in the region suggest that through childhood, girls and boys receive similar access to health care in the early years of life.³⁶ The health needs of women increase disproportionately as they reach reproductive age, when there are additional needs for reproductive health care. Health service utilization rates should therefore be higher for women than for men, but often are not.

Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR) can be considered a proxy for women's access to health care. As Figure 3 indicates, there are gaping regional disparities that set Lao PDR at one end, and developed countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Singapore at the other. MMRs have generally trended lower as a result of factors such as general improvements in nutrition, increased access to safe water and transport, more skilled staff to attend births (Figure 4), and falling fertility rates, which, by reducing maternal depletion syndrome, reduce the probability of maternal mortality. As in other countries and regions fertility rates have fallen as a result of new incentives created by the development process itself,

³⁶ However, in China and South Korea, son preference and the technology to detect and abort female fetuses has resulted in the number of boys born to every 100 girls being 117 for China and 110 for South Korea - well above the norm of 105.

for example large falls in infant mortality (reducing the number of births needed to achieve a desired family size), or the increasing market value of women's work outside the home. Family planning has also played a significant role in reducing fertility rates across the region, though women's right to make their own reproductive choices is limited in some countries, for example, on the one hand, in China through strict enforcement of the one-child policy, and on the other, in the Philippines, where religious opposition to contraception results in higher than desired fertility rates and reduced birth spacing.



Low income countries with high MMRs in 1990 such as Cambodia, Lao PDR and Indonesia, were able to achieve dramatic improvements by increasing basic access to health care and education, improving infrastructure and communications. Lower middle and middle income countries had made these easy gains before 1990 and started the decade with harder challenges to reduce the rate further. The downward trend in MMRs in the low-middle income countries has slowed, as in China and Vietnam, and few countries look set to reach the MDG target for 2015.

In all countries, the gap in access to maternal healthcare increases in rural areas where high fertility rates combine with low education and limited infrastructure. In Lao PDR, 75 percent of the population – among whom a number of ethnic minority groups – are scattered across remote rural areas. Rural MMR stands at 580, more than triple the urban MMR and disproportionately higher among ethnic minorities (ADB 2004a). In Mongolia, time costs associated with long distances in rural areas make it difficult and time-consuming for women to reach health facilities, contributing to rural MMR that are 61 percent higher than urban ones (World Bank 2002b).

Closing the Gap: the Road Forward

As the region moves towards ensuring equality in access to healthcare for men and women, especially with a view to meeting the 2015 MDG of reducing MMR by three quarters, important steps need to be taken.

Easy gains can still be made by increasing access to basic healthcare, and quality of service delivery. Easy gains can be made by bringing services closer to women – especially rural women – through extension-like programs and the provision of mobile health workers. Efficiency of service delivery is essential; a woman will not travel to a service center if there is doubt that she will receive service when she gets there. Efforts must be made to ensure greater linkages between service users and providers in order to allow women as users of services the ability to voice their concerns and demand the kind of care that they are entitled to.

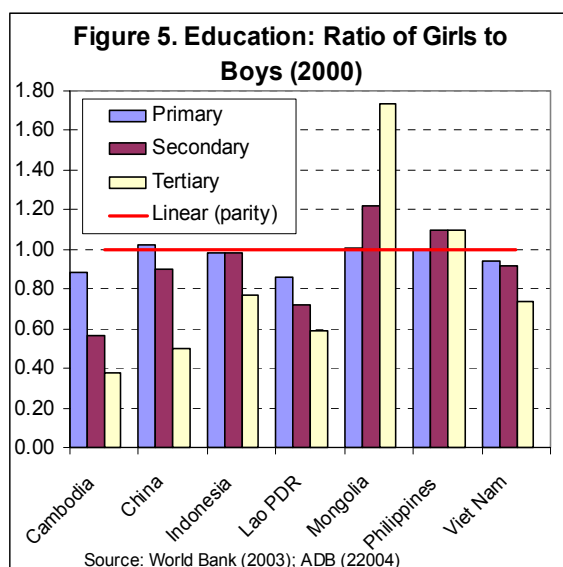
Greater resources are needed to promote affordable women-friendly and culturally appropriate services. Because of their disproportionate health needs during reproductive years, women are responsible for a larger portion of health costs. Women or their families are often put in situations where they must weigh the benefits and costs of health services, particularly as health care systems increasingly are offering both private and public services. While the availability of more choice among providers is positive, policies and programs are often needed to help cushion the costs for the most vulnerable, particularly for poor women. For instance, health equity funds such as those being piloted in Cambodia, help poor families to bear the cost of healthcare in a more sustainable manner, and may have a greater impact on women. Mother and child services help women fulfill their role as care-givers while also providing services to the women themselves. Women – especially ethnic minorities – can be encouraged to use health services more if they are more culturally appropriate, with staff who speak local languages and understand local customs.

The biggest challenge is to change women's standing in society. The tendency and expectation for women to put their families' well-being before theirs has a hidden cost on their health, particularly poor women. In Indonesia during the financial crisis the average body mass index of poor women dropped without a similar drop in their children's, suggesting that women prioritized their children's nutrition over their own (World Bank 1999b). Societal norms harmful to women persist. Beliefs – such as “hard work during pregnancy strengthens a woman for childbirth” – reflect societal notions that undervalue women as individuals and view them in relation to their reproductive role. Such notions pose a difficult challenge, but incremental change will come from women's increased education and participation in the public sphere.

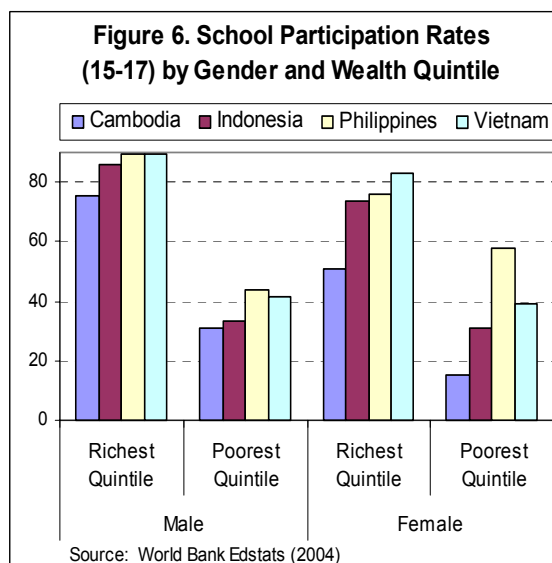
The Social Sectors: Equality in Access to Education

Narrowing the Gap: the Road since Beijing

Girls' educational attainment has seen significant achievements in East Asia, be it in increased literacy rates, enrolment rates, or completion rates. With some exceptions, most countries started the 1990s with relatively high educational indicators at the primary level, and a relatively small gender gap in favor of boys, so the scope for large improvements was limited. (Figure 5). However, having started the 1990s with the lowest regional educational indicators, Lao PDR and Cambodia did make dramatic progress in primary enrolment rates and in narrowing the ratio of girls to boys at that level. Cambodia saw rapid growth of primary enrolment rates in the poorest quintiles, especially for girls. In retention rates, there has been a 65 percent increase in the number of female pupils who reach grade 5 between 1990 and 2004.



Equality at secondary level has been harder to achieve although China, Indonesia, and Vietnam have succeeded or are close, while the Philippines and Mongolia now have a problem of keeping boys rather than girls in secondary school. As for Cambodia and Lao PDR, their accomplishments at the primary level have not been matched at the secondary level, and in Cambodia's case its progress has even gone backwards with less boys and girls enrolling than before. Interestingly, in selected East Asian countries male-female school enrolment gaps in urban areas are very similar to those in rural areas until higher levels. The bigger issue is the gap for both boys and girls between urban and rural areas. Similarly for income levels, the biggest difference is between rich and poor children rather than the male-female gaps within the same income brackets (Figure 6).



The greatest gaps are found in tertiary education, suggesting a perception of higher opportunity costs associated with remaining in school, and the seemingly low returns on education for girls – or in some countries, boys – at that level. In China, where the tertiary enrolment ratio is 5 girls to 10 boys, there is evidence that women university graduates have been discouraged from applying for certain jobs by some employers (World Bank 2002a). Mongolia and the Philippines are the exceptions again, and the gaps are in favor of girls. The largest gender gap in education in the region is a gap in favor of girls at tertiary level in Mongolia, possibly reflecting the high opportunity cost, or the lack of relevance of tertiary education, for boys who are primarily herders.

Closing the Gap: the Road Forward

Closing the gender gap in secondary education is within easy reach, increasing access for all is harder. Given how far East Asia has come, little effort is needed to close the remaining gender gaps in secondary education in those countries like Cambodia and Lao PDR where they still exist. Doing so will mean ensuring girls can travel safely to school, protecting the modesty of adolescent girls, for example by providing separate toilet facilities or safe boarding accommodation. A greater challenge is to increase the access to secondary education for both boys and girls in these countries by increasing the number of schools in rural and remote areas. Such an investment would go a long way in boosting their human capital and securing greater returns to education.

Efforts are needed to address pricing issues, expenditure targeting, and opportunity costs. The introduction of educational fees in East Asia is affecting access, particularly for the poor. In China, there are growing concerns that rising educational costs risk eroding educational gains,

especially in rural areas. Opportunity and other costs can easily work to the disadvantage of girls. Therefore, pricing policies need to take into account this gender dimension and be accompanied by measures to protect the most vulnerable. At the same time, public expenditure needs to be more in-line with educational needs and policies. In Cambodia, tertiary and technical education – which comprises 0.5 percent of the overall student population – accounted for 30 percent of public spending in 1996 (World Bank 1999a). In view of the relative absence of women in tertiary and technical education, this budget allocation not only suggests a lack of gender-sensitive targeting but also that educational expenditures on boys at that level exceed those on girls. The move towards greater fiscal decentralization in East Asia – which has moved much of the responsibility of financing basic education to local governments – also needs to be considered in light of potential gender inequalities. Unequal revenue bases – and consequently unequal abilities to bear the costs of provision – by many local governments can adversely affect the most vulnerable. In this regard, a systematic compensatory policy is needed at the national level to assist poor local governments in the provision of educational and other services.

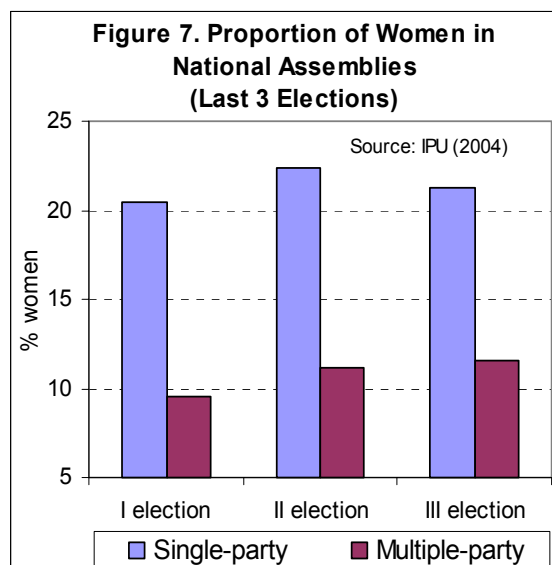
Efforts are needed to address gender stereotypes in schools and society. School curricula need to be carefully designed and teachers trained to ensure that the potential of boys and girls is not limited by stereotypes. According to a recent survey on domestic violence in Lao PDR, a woman's level of education was a significant factor influencing the occurrence of domestic violence in rural areas, with the higher the level, the greater the likelihood of abuse (GDG 2004). Education for ethnic minorities is particularly challenging in this respect as the conflict between strongly held cultures and traditions and the realities of the modern economy may be particularly threatening to both men and women.

Representation in Decision-Making *Narrowing the Gap – Progress since Beijing*

At a mere 1.6 percent, the overall increase in women's political participation in national elected bodies between the early 1990s and today appears minimal. Perhaps more encouraging is that while women's representation reached double digits in only four of fourteen countries reviewed, in the early 1990s, today only four of these countries have less than 10 percent women in parliament.

There are some interesting trends across the region. The proportion of women in national assemblies is higher in single party states (Figure 7) apparently as a result of top-down affirmative-action selection principles. On the other hand, in multi-party systems women have greater choices between political ideas and policies, and typically also a greater variety of civil liberties, but have to be selected for office through open competitive elections, in which the

public's traditional stereotypes and prejudices can play a role, as can the type of electoral system. (Also, there seems to be no correlation in the multi-party states between the stage of socio-economic development and women's representation – Japan lies between Papua New Guinea and Mongolia with the lowest representation.)



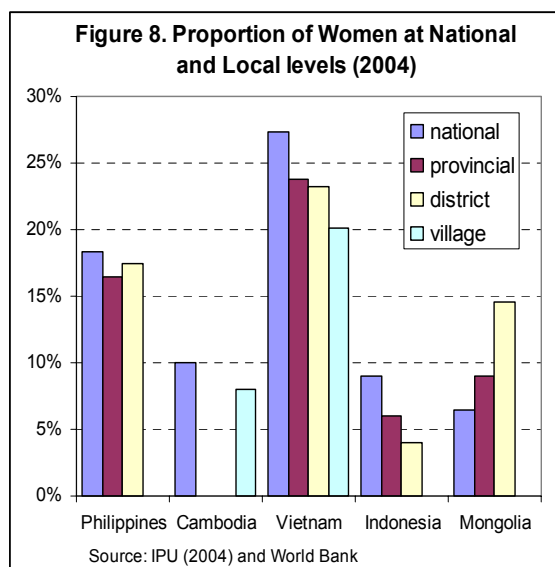
There are however, examples in the region that show it is possible to increase women's participation in democracies where there has been strong commitment and support for this. Concerted efforts by the Timorese resulted in a 23 percent participation of women in the first national parliament of the new country – the highest in a multi-party state in the region. After years of very low participation of women, the leadership in Singapore decided to increase women's participation, and used a mixture of rules, incentives and encouragement to send a strong signal to political parties with the result that women's participation increased from 2.5 percent in 1991 to 16 percent in 2001. Across the region, the trend in multi-party states is slowly and steadily upwards but greater action will be needed to foster and accelerate this trend.

This is not to say that women are not participating in the political process. It is worth noting that almost always in national elections, voter turn-out is higher among women. There is also the increasingly organized and effective role of women in independent civil society and social movements. When the grass-roots women's movement, the Voice of Concerned Mothers took to the streets in Indonesia to demonstrate against the price of milk powder in 1997, it was the start of months of broader protest that led to the downfall of the Suharto regime. Women's organizations throughout the region have worked with state agencies to

help draft new constitutions that give women equal rights to men, and have lobbied successfully for various changes in laws and policies. In Thailand, women's groups lobbied for the right to retain family names after marriage, and for a quota in village councils that would make decisions on allocations of money through a government village fund proposal. Watchdog or human rights NGOs actively fighting corruption are often headed by women, such as the Center for Social Development, or Licadho in Cambodia, or Procurement Watch in the Philippines.

The trend in the region is to decentralize decision-making to lower levels and women's representation in government and civil society at sub-national levels is also important. A comparison of women's representation in sub-national elected bodies in a selection of countries across the region (figure 8) shows a trend for fewer women to be elected at lower levels. For example in China, where village committees are now directly elected, women's representation dropped from 30 to 16 percent since 1998. (China Daily 2004). The exception is Mongolia, where women's participation increases progressively at lower levels. There are some positive signs that over time this trend will improve: the percentage of female elected village heads in Indonesia has increased progressively year by year from 2 percent in 1996 to 3.4 percent in 2001. At the same time, despite the success of women's civil society groups at national level, they have been less effective at the local level. The absence of women in local parliaments or other voice-mechanisms has led to examples of local laws being passed that actively discriminate against women. In Indonesia, religious edicts are being introduced in certain parts of the country, threatening to undermine the rights and protections that were previously available under a centralized system. (World Bank 2004). There are some successes: for example women's church movements in local areas of West Papua in Indonesia successfully lobbied for restrictions on the sale of alcohol which they saw as a contributing factor to the high levels of domestic violence.

Women's participation in decision-making can also be through appointed positions or through representation in higher levels of the civil service, neither of which shows encouraging trends in the East Asia region. One has to search hard to find a woman who has been appointed provincial or district governor in the region – for example, there are only seven women district heads in Indonesia and no women provincial governors. Also in the civil service, women are disproportionately represented at the lower levels and rarely end up in positions of authority, although the presence of women in key central-level positions in Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines can convey a rosier picture. In the Philippines, women outnumber men significantly at the middle levels, and yet the majority of senior level positions are held by men.



Closing the Gap: the Road Forward

Representation of women in formal decision-making in East Asia still has a long way to go to meet MDG targets. Despite overall progress, the region has yet to tackle the barriers that reinforce unequal gender relationships and perpetuate women's marginalization in the decision-making sphere. Part of this challenge is political, requiring policies and frameworks that would enable women's increased participation. The other part is cultural, demanding a change in mind-set that would challenge the current attitudes and practices that obliterate women's potential as a decision-making partner. However, while change in the government bodies may be slow, change in the women's movement and civil society organizations is not and at least in the short term, it is these groups on which women must rely throughout the region to lobby for policy changes in their favor.

Quick wins would come through providing greater support to women's groups and movements at both national and local levels and from implementing affirmative action policies to ensure representation by women. Given the demonstrated impacts of women's movements throughout East Asia there would seem to be very positive and cost-effective impacts to be had from building their capacity further. There is potential for them to participate more formally in policy dialogue, analysis of policies and budgets, as well as implementation of activities dedicated to closing gaps. With regard to formal representation in government, attention needs to be placed on electoral systems and the limited application of laws, which can inadvertently undermine women's chances of getting elected. In Cambodia, a party list system has placed women lower down the party lists than men, and reduced their chances of getting elected. In the Philippines and Timor, the opposite is true, and this system has helped women

climb up the representation ladder. Such support would entail increasing opportunities for political training for women as well as the implementation of existing quotas and other measures.

Efforts must be made to ensure decentralization protects women's hard fought gains and protections. Many of the region's active and vocal women – whether in elected bodies, civil service, or civil society – tend to be at the central level, in the capital cities. It is less likely that there will be active participation of – or lobbying by – representatives of women at the local level, and decisions made or laws passed risk being gender-blind or even openly discriminatory towards women. Community Driven Development projects that set out to increase and develop the participation of women in village or sub-district decision-making offer the best opportunities to develop the capacity of local women to participate effectively and build understanding of government systems from the bottom. The ability to reach large numbers of women through these projects has the potential to build a cadre of women at local level with the skills and experience to stand for local level elections.

Over the long term, policies and efforts must take into account the changing political and economic role of women in the region and support it through fostering a more conducive environment for them in policy making. Despite women's accomplishments, female stereotypes that portray women as weak and inferior to men continue to prevail in East Asia, be it through textbooks, proverbs, or practices. Citing women's physical and intellectual limitations, a survey in the Philippines showed negative attitudes towards women's role in politics. In Vietnam, one of the reasons that women's presence at the local level is low relates to the fact that historically they could not vote or be candidates as they did not own land. While today they can own land, these notions persist. Though there is no quick fix, efforts targeting the educational curriculum and the media, relevant training for women and awareness-raising campaigns are needed to nurture women's political aspirations and dispel female stereotypes.

Legal and Institutional Mechanisms

Probably the most noticeable progress that can be largely attributed to the Beijing meeting has been in the area of institutions, policies and laws concerning women, or gender equality. Table 2 shows the progression in this area in selected countries, and highlighting legal reforms in the areas of land, labor and violence against women, and institutional reforms and policies for mainstreaming gender.

Labor laws with provisions to ensure gender equality were amongst the earliest of the laws to have been enacted. However, gaps still exist; some laws take a protectionist approach that removes the element of choice for women and

in the informal sector where women predominate, there are still no legal frameworks in place to provide security. Gradually, countries are adopting formal land laws or policies that protect women's right to land and security of land ownership and use. This has been especially important in countries that have undergone land reforms and privatization of state assets. There are still concerns about the rights of women in this respect in Mongolia where the privatization of land is still on-going. More recently the countries of East Asia have put in place the legal frameworks to protect women against gender-based violence, including trafficking of women and children. Cambodia and Timor are now among the last to adopt a law on domestic violence. However, implementation of the laws is still a long way off, particularly in rural areas, and will need concerted efforts on the part of law enforcement agencies and civil society advocates engaged in increasing women's legal awareness.

All countries now have some kind of state mechanism with responsibility for women, and/or for mainstreaming gender. The last decade has seen changes in the philosophical position of governments, from that of protecting the role of women as wives and mothers to promoting gender equality. Throughout the last decade, departments for women have been elevated to Ministries, such as in Indonesia and Cambodia, and high level inter-sectoral coordinating bodies formed. However, the institutions are still weak, lack resources and capacity, and are almost uniformly struggling to define their role *vis a vis* the more powerful sectors. Although action plans prepared for the 1995 Beijing meetings have been updated, and a policy dialogue is informed by better sex-disaggregation of statistics and increasingly sophisticated analysis there is a long way to go to achieve the desired impact.

Quick gains can be made through legal aid and awareness, access to conflict resolution and informal or alternative justice mechanisms. Important gains can be made by ensuring that women are aware of their rights and have access to people and resources that can help them access formal justice systems. A recent study in the Philippines highlights a significant gender bias in the court system, deterring many women from taking their cases to court (ADB 2004b). While it is critical for formal legal systems to make changes so that they can respond more appropriately and justly to women's complaints, this may take many years in some countries. In the interim alternative dispute mechanisms – such as labor arbitration councils or cadastral commissions – can serve a vital role in solving disputes.

Policy making needs to be informed by good research, budget analysis and policy impact analysis. Much work and effort has gone into the collection of gender disaggregated statistics which would allow better analysis. Though important, the value of gender analysis lies in the

nuances and in unpicking layers of complexity which often go beyond what statistics can offer. Focused research on the impacts of different policies is needed, along with better analysis of budgets and their implications for men and women.

Concluding remarks

The trend to increase social indicators had started long before the Beijing meeting, with huge progress being made through increased provision of services and improved access. Primary education levels were generally at parity, all but a few countries had brought down maternal mortality, and women were already active in the workforce. Other than in a few countries the low-hanging fruit was already rapidly disappearing and the region was getting to the point where further progress depended on dealing with structural and cultural constraints to equality. Since Beijing the rate of progress has actually slowed in many countries despite the concerted efforts to get in place institutions, legal frameworks, and specific action plans for promoting gender equality.

However, in the region as a whole, there are still quick wins to be made to reduce gender gaps. In particular, projects and programs that increase and improve access to services

in rural areas, and that target rural women with specially adapted services to respond to their needs, will reap incremental benefits. So too will providing support for business women and female entrepreneurs, and greater protection for women workers – especially migrant workers. Increasing support for women’s civil society groups will undoubtedly reap returns based on their impressive record so far, and working through the increasing number of community driven development programs which have an immense coverage at local level in the region, offers opportunities to build capacity of local level women. Affirmative actions that strengthen women’s representation should be expanded to accelerate the pace of change.

A greater challenge lies in implementing laws and policies that have been put in place, and in increasing the sophistication of analysis of budgets and policy impacts so that policies can be fine-tuned to achieve maximum benefits. Improving gender sensitivity of curriculum and of the media will contribute to positive socio-cultural change, though ultimately the change will be inevitable, as a greater number of women become empowered to challenge stereotypes in the home, the school, the workplace, and community.

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Table 2. Gender-related Legal and Institutional Mechanisms in East Asia (1990-2005)³⁷

		New Laws/ amendments acknowledging gender issues passed			Women's Institutions Created or upgraded		Action Plans launched	Government instructions on gender mainstreaming
		Labor	Land	VAW	Ministries/ offices for women	Inter-ministerial councils		
1990-1995	(a) CA MB ODI A				X			
	China	X				X		
	Indonesia				X			
	Lao PDR	X						
	Mongolia	X			X			
	Philippines							
	Vietnam	X				X		
1995-2000	Cambodia	X			X		X	
	China						X	
	Indonesia				X	X		
	Lao PDR		X					
	Mongolia	X			X	X	X	
	Philippines			X	X		X	X
	Vietnam						X	
2000-2005	Cambodia		X	O*		X	X	X
	China		X				X	
	Indonesia			X			X	X
	Lao PDR			X		X		X
	Mongolia	X		X	X	X	X	
	Philippines			X			X	
	Vietnam		X	O*			X	X

³⁷ In table 2, X refers to action passed while O refers to action in progress.

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