

WOMEN AND SOCIAL SECURITY:

Impact of Financial Crisis

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I. Introduction

It became clear after East Asia's economies ran into trouble in 1997: it was not just a financial and economic crisis, but also a human one – with the well-being of the millions of people at stake. Particularly exposed are women in the informal economy, which has few institutions to provide even a minimum of collective security. Thus, they are subject to many forms of impacts caused by the financial turbulences. Due to their position in the labour market where they were concentrated in the "most precarious" forms of low-skilled wage employment, women were more vulnerable to lay-offs. Their vulnerabilities were further exacerbated by the attitude of the employers who regarded women as secondary income earners and so terminated their employment before men. The increase in women's unemployment is certain to leave led to a rise in the inequality and poverty. Their school attendance and health care are under threat, and the gender gap may well widen again.

This phenomenon revealed that governments were ill prepared to manage the impact of the crisis and that coverage of existing social protection systems was generally inadequate. Most households had few formal mechanisms of risk management relying largely on savings and links to family and communities. From an early stage in the crisis it has been clear that action would need to be taken to protect the most vulnerable and to preserve the human development gains that had been made. The most effective way is to build social safety nets.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the issues that women are confronting in the areas so far. It focuses on four actions to improve women's condition: (1) alleviate the feminization of poverty, (2) provide education and training programs for women and girls, (3) promote women's self-reliance, (4) apply information and communication technology for women's empowerment. As women's rights will be finally recognized as an integral part of the entire paradigm of international human rights, empowering women and improving their status are essential to realize the full potential of economic, political and social development system in Asia.

II. Women's status and role

Asian women have many outstanding characteristics, such as their industrious, dutiful, conscientious and intelligent personalities, but most of all is their roles in keeping the society in stable development. Some scholars subscribe to a feminist theoretical perspective on conflict resolution². In Asia, this opinion has been proved to be true. Women in this part of the world are socially conditioned to be more peaceful and peace loving and less violent than men. They attribute the more pacifist orientation of females to the roles that women play as mothers responsible for giving birth to and nurturing the future generations and as conciliators within the family and in their local communities. Moreover, women, as a result of their intermediary role within the household and community, have well-developed negotiating skills which

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² *The Role of Women in United Nations Peace-keeping* by Janet C. Beilstein, Division for the Advancement of Women/DPCSD, December 1995 - No.1/1995.

could and should be extended into conflict resolution and negotiations in national and international arenas.

It has also been contended that the presence of women contributes to differences in decision-making in terms of content, priorities, management style, organizational culture and group dynamics in Asian countries. Women's leadership is likely to bring less militarily inclined peacekeeping. There is a minimum level of representation required to enable any minority to influence the culture of a task-oriented group. It has therefore been acknowledged that where women have joined organizations or decision-making bodies in sufficient numbers, they have created a more collaborative atmosphere, characterized by mutual respect, and sought consensus rather than a winner-take-all solution. In Eastern Asia women tend to focus more on resolving rather than simply discussing problems, a characteristic important in dealing with social security matters, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution.

1. Women as a productive force

Along with the economic and social development in Asia, women's work has been on the changing nature. Foremost is that of the feminization of employment. The growing labor force participation of women, as well as their increasing share of total employment, has been evident across the developing countries in Eastern Asia since 1980. The productive contribution of East Asian women to the boom is now widely recognized: through paid labour in export-related activities, other manufacturing and services, through remittances made by migrant women workers, through vast amounts of unpaid labour. Women were often not simply subsidiary workers working to supplement household earning, but the dominant contributors to household income. Table 1 shows that female labor force takes large amount as percentage of male in most South East Asian countries.

In the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, this feminization of work in much of the Asian regions occurred in a context in which overall growth was also growing quite strongly, unlike most other parts of the developing world. The high and rising proportion of women workers in total employment has been especially marked in countries where export-oriented manufacturing has been prominent, e.g. Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines. This was resulted from employers' needs for cheaper and more "flexible" sources of labour given the rigours of international trade competition. That is why it has been associated with more casual contracts, part-time or piece-rate contracts, and greater freedom of hiring and firing. More recently, information and telecommunications technology have had a pervasive effect on women's employment in some countries in the region. Whereas automation and new management practices threaten the jobs of low-skilled women workers, computer technology and communications, particularly in the banking and insurance sectors, bring new opportunities for the employment of women. Nevertheless, feminization of the labour force continues to be encouraged by the widespread perception that female employees are more tractable and subservient to managerial authority, less prone to organize into unions, more willing to accept lower wages, less likely to expect upward job mobility and easier to dismiss using life-cycle criteria such as marriage and childbirth. This has underlined the inequality in employment.

Table 1: Female and male labor force in South East Asia

Region Country or area	Year	Number of Labor Force(in thousands)			Female Labor as a percent of Males
		Females	Males	Tatol	
Southeast Asia	1980	63798	93421	157219	68
	1990	87206	119692	206898	73
	1995	99121	133932	233054	74
	1998	10515	141087	246602	75

Sources: International Labour Office, Bureau of Statistics, 1996. *Economically Active Population 1950-2010, Vol.I Asia, Vol.IV North America - Europe - Oceania* (STAT Working Papers No.96-1, No.96-4).
United Nations Population Division. *World Population Prospects : The 1998 Revision* (United Nations publication, forthcoming).

2. Women's Conspicuous Economic Activities

Women-owned small businesses in South East Asia are making a significant contribution to employment generation, poverty alleviation and social and economic empowerment of women in the region. In several countries, these businesses are growing at a faster rate than the economy as a whole. They have demonstrated great potential in undertaking successful ventures, adopt innovative approaches to business management, and seek out new market opportunities. Women-owned businesses produce strong backward and forward linkages with other segments of the economy and add to the inherent resilience of market-based economic systems. The presence of women-owned small businesses is also increasing in the service sector as the influence of physical capital-intensive production processes declines and human capital-based production processes become more predominant. The advent of new forms of technologies, especially information technologies, and decentralized work management systems, has brought opportunities for women to enter into new areas of business ownership and management.

However, the introduction of price liberalization and expansion of market-oriented economies in some countries of Southeast Asia, have had negative impact on the living conditions of women. They have faced a sharp increase in unemployment and reduction of welfare provisions as a result of the development of the private sector and denationalization of many factories and plants, which include state owned lands of collective farms. Therefore, the number of women-headed households in rural areas has increased as the search for jobs led to massive internal migration from rural to urban areas. This trend in some countries has developed home worker jobs, which has been proved to be a good way in strengthening income and generating opportunities for both rural and urban women. Home workers are defined as individuals performing work outside the employer's work site and whom the employer pays for this work. According to the results of a recent special survey of home workers, a total of 311,790 people were home workers in Thailand in 1999. Most home workers were females. Of all the 311,790 home workers, 20.0% were males and 80.0% were females. As they worked at home or in the nearby area, so that they could at the same time look after the family or do household chores, which matched the role of women.

3. Women's Public and Political Role

Asia has had the largest number of women elected head of government during the past three decades of any region in the world. Yet female representation among

parliamentarians and decision-making officials has been among the lowest of any region. Although progress in improving the proportion of women serving in politics and administration has been steady, women continue to be in the minority in the area of power and decision-making. For some reasons such as stereotyped attitudes on women's role in the society, insufficient understanding of gender equality in the society and the influence of conventional male-dominated attitudes upon women themselves, resulting in lack of self-confidence to take part in decision-making etc. women at decision-making levels in various sectors are in low representation.

It is true that women are still far less likely than men to be concerned about politics. But in the present era of reformation, women in East Asia are becoming increasingly aware that they too have an important political role to play in their respective community as well as in the nation. For instance, in Kowani, a local place of Indonesia, women have paid particular attention to their status and their strategic interest. In the current political situation, Kowani's women will make every endeavor to make the best use of the election for the improvement of their situation in the political sector. They aim at attaining gender equality in all aspects of life and at all levels. Since the Indonesian Women's Congress in February 1999, they have composed a common platform focusing on democracy, equality between men and women in the process of decision-making in all aspects of life, human rights and the alleviation of poverty.

III. Impact of Financial Crisis on Women

The spectacular economic growth of the East Asian region was one of the most prominent features of the recent history of the world economy. Both in terms of the growth rate of GDP and the rate of export growth, the developing economies of East Asia in the aggregate outperformed any other grouping. While the growth of the previous two decades had improved living standards for a substantial proportion of the population in this region, a major shift in gender-specific employment patterns was widely molded to transform the nature of work in the region, most significantly by drawing in more women as paid workers and involving very different conditions of work. The export boom since 1985 was largely driven by the paid and unpaid labour of women in the region, with mixed consequences for their economic conditions.

Reality, however, diverged very dramatically from this optimistic scenario from about the middle of 1997 due to the financial crisis. Exports decelerated across the region and even declined for a few countries, and adversely affected both business confidence and employment in some important manufacturing sectors like textiles and electronics.

A UNDP Working Paper³ reflects the gravity of the situation: "Families are breaking apart; many small children are being left at children's institutions; violent and petty crimes alike are rising sharply; individual and family suicides are becoming part of everyday news." The severity of the social consequences of the crisis in Indonesia is reflected in a rise in the incidence of poverty to 24 percent at the end of 1998, among whom most are females. Just as the expansionary processes in many countries of the region were not managed adequately to ensure that the boom benefited as many women in many ways as possible, so now the result is that the costs of contraction have fallen disproportionately upon women in a variety of ways. Women are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks because of their unequal

³ *Mitigating the Human Impact of the Asian Crisis: The Role of UNDP* by Nay Htun, UNDP Regional Director, for Asia and the Pacific UNDP September 1999.

position and role in the labor market and in society more generally. They are much less well represented at decision-making levels as well as in labor organizations.

In addition, the current deflationary adjustment policies have adversely affected women not only as workers, but also as household providers, mothers, etc. Women's access to basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and to the provisioning of common property resources; access to education and skill formation which would allow women to move out of low-skill low productivity jobs, access to the requirements for reproduction and nurture of the young including not only health care and other social services but also child care, access to productive employment outside the home and recognition of household work, control over the allocation of resources both socially and within households have been negatively affected not only by the reduction in government expenditure that comes as part of the stabilization exercise but also by the general withdrawal of the state from various aspects of the provisioning of goods and services and greater reliance on the market mechanism. Real incomes have been reduced as standards of living for most women who assume a greater burden of unpaid work. The effects of the crisis discussed in this section hide important differences in the experiences of different aspects. A disaggregated analysis from different glances may help identify the impacts on women.

1. Women and Unemployment

The economic crisis has hit households hard through falling labor demand, sharp price shifts, a public spending squeeze and erosion of the social fabric. All these are causing female layoffs, their real wage declines, weak demand for new labor market entrants and falling margins in the informal sector. As data is unavailable in the whole region, we may take Thailand for example. As shown from table 2, rural employment declined sharply and this decline was entirely among women. It appears that most of these women had to return to housework.

Table 2: Unemployment of persons who are 13 or older in Thailand (In Million)

	MALE				FEMALE			
Unemployed persons	1995	1996	1997	1998	1995	1996	1997	1998
Rural	0.70	0.49	0.49	1.04	1.35	1.09	1.01	1.32
Urban	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.18	0.14	0.12	0.13	0.20
Total Unemployed	0.80	0.59	0.59	1.22	1.49	1.21	1.14	1.51
Rural	3.10	3.14	3.32	3.34	5.70	5.82	6.12	6.42
Urban	1.72	1.71	1.76	1.92	3.06	3.08	3.14	3.20
Total outside the Labour Force	4.82	4.85	5.08	5.26	8.77	8.89	9.26	9.63

Source: Labor Force Survey [ROUND 1]1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, National Statistical Office, data tapes.

The financial crisis that began with the devaluation of the Baht in July 1997 resulted in a large economic contraction of the Thai economy. Thai women have been at the front lines of Thailand's economic crisis since the onset in July 1997. They have lost jobs, wages, and hours worked (see table 3). They have to migrate to find work, changed occupations for better opportunities, left the labor force to go back to school or work at home, and remained in low wage jobs in the agriculture sector to survive. Thai women have adapted in many ways to the economic downturn, and in doing so, they have demonstrated the Thai way of dealing with adversity. They have worked harder, have shared jobs and resources with each other and have striven for new opportunities.

Table 3: Employment of persons who are 13 or older in Thailand (In Million)

	Male				Female			
Employed Persons by Status	1995	1996	1997	1998	1995	1996	1997	1998
Rural	11.6	12.0	12.0	11.6	8.26	8.60	8.56	8.13
	6	1	3	5				
Employees	4.83	5.12	5.12	4.56	2.76	2.94	2.94	2.81
Self-employed	5.36	5.46	5.33	5.53	2.32	2.33	2.25	2.25
Unpaid family workers	1.47	1.43	1.58	1.56	3.18	3.33	3.38	3.07
Urban	5.07	5.24	5.33	5.23	4.07	4.25	4.35	4.40
Employees	3.21	3.40	3.37	3.29	2.36	2.54	2.63	2.69
Self-employed	1.55	1.50	1.60	1.59	0.92	0.91	0.89	0.91
Unpaid family workers	0.31	0.34	0.36	0.36	0.79	0.80	0.83	0.81
Total Employment	16.7	17.2	17.3	16.8	12.3	12.8	12.9	12.5
	2	5	6	8	3	4	1	3

Source: Labor Force Survey [ROUND 1]1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, National Statistical Office, data tapes.

In the whole East Asian region, the inequitable distribution of crisis impacts is worrying, but is also not surprising. The females, young, less educated, less skilled and low wage employees are typically at higher risk of job and wage loss in any labor market downturn. Even in the period of boom, female unemployment rates have been higher than those for men, and by the mid-1990s the phase of rapid expansion of female jobs already appeared to be tapering off. In the most recent period this has intensified, with women workers disproportionately losing jobs due to retrenchment in manufacturing and services activities. This was inevitable given that women were originally preferred as workers largely because of the greater ease of dismissal among other things.

This trend may last for some times in the future. Despite the currency devaluations across the region, it has been forecasted that export growth would not revive sufficiently to allow for the revival of employment generation at the same pace as the past decade. Along with the process of retrenchment and job loss, the changing nature of world trade, the pattern of labour-saving technological innovations and the deflationary adjustment policies now being adopted in many countries of the region, all point to shrinking employment across South East Asia, and very little hope for rapid employment expansion. As most of these countries have no safety nets for unemployed workers, the potential social and economic problems are huge.

2. Women's Living Standard

Employment is an essential means to income, nutrition, health, and education, as well as to the less tangible but no less important attribute of self-esteem. The impact of rising unemployment has affected women in some households more than others and thus could alter the income distribution and lead to a lowering living standard. Price increases for basic foodstuffs have affected consumption patterns--particularly for women and children.

The reduction in consumption of affected households in Korea and Thailand would be expected to be half as much under similar assumptions. The situation would be made worse in Indonesia if new labor market entrants, numbering

about 2.5 million annually, do not find jobs. According the paper *Mitigating the Human Impact of the Asian Crisis: The Role of UNDP* (by Nay Htun, UNDP, 2000), in Indonesia the number of poor would increase by up to 12.3 million persons (6 percent of the population), by up to 4.7 million persons in Korea (10 percent of the population), and by up to 5.4 million persons in Thailand (9 percent of the population). Among those numbers most of them are women.

The impact on real consumption could be reinforced by large price increases for particular commodities. In Indonesia and Thailand, food makes up a relatively large share of the poor's consumption basket. For the average poor household, food accounts for 71 percent of household expenditure in Indonesia (with rice accounting for 20 percent) and about 55 percent in Thailand. Thus, the impact on women's living standard of the significant price increases for food would be relatively large in these two countries for the existing poor families. Assuming that one person per household is affected by unemployment, an increase in unemployment in Indonesia of 9 million workers since before the crisis would affect 21 percent of all families.

Soaring prices of medicine and health services force those poor people to increasingly rely on traditional healers/medication, which are cheaper and easier to access. Women are forced to neglect their reproductive health. The distribution of contraceptives has suffered, affecting women dependent on these fertility control devices. The health status of pregnant women is particularly threatened. Maternal anemia is high, contributing to high maternal mortality which already prior to the crisis was the highest in the region (see table 4). Table 4 may not completely reflect the health status of women after crisis, but it is obvious that maternal mortality rate is higher than that in the boom period. Also children are increasingly suffering from malnutrition.

Table 4: Maternal Mortality Rate
(Per 100,000 Live Births)

	Indonesia	Rep. Of Korea	Malaysia	Philippines	Thailand
1988	300	80	120	250	180
1990	650	130	80	280	200
1994	390	30	34		155
1995	349		20	180	
1990-97	390	30	34	210	200

Sources: based on data from Human Development Report, United Nations Development Program, 1990, 1991,1992,1993,1994,1995,1996,1997,1998 and 1999.

Obviously, the sharp decline in family income had a negative impact on women's consumption of health services and this was exacerbated by the increase in prices of health-related inputs during the crisis. These negative effects were magnified by reduction in employer- provided health facilities in the formal sectors; retrenched female workers mostly lost access to the facilities whereas those who kept their jobs faced reduction in coverage.

3. Women and the Families

Within the household, most of the burden lies on the women for they are the household managers as wives and mothers. Women have to make ends meet with the increasingly limited resources and declining purchasing power. The primary concern of poor women is procuring food for their families. Thus, concerns about health and

education of their children can only be secondary. Those involve an especial burden on female children within the family.

In addition, where many women have been forced in such circumstances to seek additional income outside the home, this has put pressure on girl-children who have to take up some of the activities of the household and childcare otherwise performed by their mothers. In extreme cases this has led to their withdrawal from schooling and other negative effects. Other negative features, which have a gender dimension associated with structural adjustment programs are in the area of food security - a critical issue throughout East Asian developing countries. The emphasis on primary product export along with cuts in food and other subsidies typical of such structural packages lead almost automatically to the growth in the relative price of food and therefore put pressure on real consumption within households. It is widely acknowledged that in many Asian societies, social and cultural norms are such that women and girl children face disproportionately excessive cuts in their food consumption when household per capita access to food declines.

A survey conducted in Thailand⁴ found that mass lay-offs in 1998 mostly took place in the textiles and electronics industry where 90 per cent workers were women. Business losses were claimed as the major reason for laying off workers. Most of the laid off women workers were aged 40-50 or near retirement. The employers chose to retrench the more senior workers to avoid paying retirement benefits and other emoluments associated with seniority. Most of them were workers with low skills who spent most of their lives in the industrial sector. Many found it difficult to find new jobs or did not hope to find new jobs as their qualifications did not match current requirements.

Most of these South East Asian women workers were supporting their families and had children to take care of. For coping with the situation some turned to smaller or subcontractor factories most of which paid much lower wage, maintained very poor working conditions and violated labour laws. Some switched to informal occupation such as selling fruits and desserts and making dresses, while many returned to their homes in rural areas. A large number of retrenched women were forced to completely depend on their husbands and relatives. Many of them were refused help by their husbands who did not want to bear the burden of their unemployed wives.

4., Women's Migration

International and national migration have been much more significant recent years for young Asian women than for other women elsewhere in the developing world. There are two major types of such migration: the international within the broad Asian region (i.e. heading towards West Asia and the Gulf countries) and the internal, which comprises both seasonal migrations for agricultural work and other movements of female labour for longer periods. Domestic workers (usually young and unmarried) make up the bulk of the flow of female international migrants, within which there is a high incidence of illegal migration where women are employed in domestic service or similar low-paid low-status activities such as in the entertainment industries or other services. The other form of migration, that of the movement of young women from villages and less developed regions to other areas within the country became more prevalent in recent years. Throughout South East Asia, young unmarried women from rural households have headed for urban employment in export industries or in the services sector. With the strong preference shown for

⁴ *Women workers hit hard* by Anjira Asvananda, *Bangkok Post*, 20 December 1998, p. 3.

young unmarried women in the export industries, older married women with children have been typically left at the bottom of the job pyramid with few employment options and are usually confined to home-based putting out production.

The economic problems in the region and the rapidly growing unemployment have led to an unfortunate tendency to focus on migrant workers as the source of the problem. Rapid growth in the region prior to the crisis attracted large numbers of migrant workers, especially intra-regional migrants. In mid-1997 there were almost 4.5 million foreign workers in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea. Throughout the region there have been incidents of attacks on migrant workers, forcible repatriation of migrants and similar forms of social intolerance towards neighbours. Woman-migrants were in an especially vulnerable position, not having access to any social protection programs and being regarded as a convenient cushion to absorb the worst effects of the crisis, shielding native citizens. In Thailand, the impact on recent woman-migrants was extremely severe. Starting with lower earnings and longer hours of work, working in domestic service, entertainment, and manufacturing, they were impacted most sharply by increased unemployment. Migrants from poor countries often end up working in the “3 D occupations”, (Dirty, Difficult, and Dangerous) which are less attractive for the local population. Woman-migrant workers are the most vulnerable of all workers even in good times; in bad times such as these, they are even worse off because they tend to come low down in the policy priorities of both host and home governments.

IV. Critical Issues towards Women

The negative impact of Asian financial crisis, the deteriorating economic environment in many countries in the region and structural adjustment programs without adequate safeguards for the resulting impacts on population have produced pessimistic influence on women. The critical areas of concern for women in East Asia have three aspects: the economic issue such as women's rising unemployment and deepening poverty, women's economic participation, children dropping out of school, especially girls; political concerns relating to women's participation in politics, government and decision-making process; social issues related to socio-cultural and institutional barriers which hamper women's political empowerment also include violence against women, trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation etc.

1. Gender Issues in Employment and Business Activities

The imperfect mechanisms in East Asia have not ensured that governments are responsive and accountable to their female citizens. Thus they have not fulfilled their obligations to implement commitments to social and economic development that can involve, benefit and empower women, to save them from poverty and to safeguard their natural resources even though some efforts have been taken in the past few decades. This can be seen from the high rate unemployment and obstacles for women in economic activities.

In Indonesia, unemployment is increasing at a startling rate as a result of the economic crisis. According to figures published by the Ministry of Manpower that the number of people looking for work was 13.4 million in 1998. In some sectors, such as textile and garment industries, there are a high percentage of women workers losing their jobs. Anecdotal evidence suggests, in the whole region, women workers are being disproportionately affected by the crisis on four counts: 1) Many of the sectors that will be most affected are those where women predominate (e.g. textile,

garments, shoes); 2) Women workers are more likely to be made redundant than male workers because they are not seen as the main breadwinners; 3) More women tend to be employed on informal or casual basis and are therefore easiest and cheapest to make redundant; and 4) there are limited opportunities for women in the crisis and few responsive programs designed to provide survival incomes to unemployed workers. Once they lost their jobs, it is hard for women to start or to operate a small business to survive.

In small businesses women continue to face formidable difficulties. In particular, they lack access to business networks and contacts, vital for the successful operation and expansion of their enterprises. Market imperfections, inappropriate policies, and institutional constraints prevent them from accessing financial resources and obtaining information on business opportunities. On many occasions, women entrepreneurs are handicapped because they lack the knowledge and the expertise to comprehend market trends about what consumers want, what prices to charge, what kind of packaging to be done, and what kind of business strategy needs to be followed to remain competitive. The economic crisis in East Asian region has added a new urgency in overcoming some of these difficulties so that women-owned small businesses can continue to function as an important source for employment generation and poverty alleviation. Forging greater links with other businesses in the region and utilizing those links for promoting trade and investment could be an important step in ensuring the viability and economic survival of women-owned small businesses in an environment marked by keen competition and rapid change.

2. Women's Education

Women have made significant gains in education over the past few decades, but there are marked regional contrasts. Literacy rates for women have increased to at least 75 per cent in most countries of East Asia. However, high rates of illiteracy among women still prevail in many parts of East Asian countries, and high illiteracy is generally accompanied by large differences in rates between women and men (see table 5). Progress in primary and secondary enrolment for girls was reversed in the 1980s in regions experiencing political and economic instability.

Table 5: Adult Literacy Rate in Southeast Asia(%)

		Indonesia	Rep. of Korea	Malaysia	Philippines	Thailand
1980	Female	57.7	90.1	59.7	88.7	84.0
	Male	77.5	97.5	79.6	90.6	92.3
1985	Female	65.0	91.0	66.0	85.0	88.0
	Male	83.0	96.0	81.0	86.0	94.0
1990	Female	75.3	95.2	73.6	93.2	91.2
	Male	88.3	99.0	86.9	94.0	95.6
1995	Female	72.7	96.7	78.1	94.3	91.6
	Male	87.0	99.3	89.1	95.0	96.0
1996	Female	74.9				
	Male	88.0				
1997	Female	77.6	95.5	81.0	94.3	92.8
	Male	89.6	98.9	90.2	94.8	96.7
1998	Female	78.1				
	Male	89.9				

1999	Female	79.3				
	Male	90.6				

Sources: Based on data from Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries, Asian Development Bank, 1999.

Women's educational progress is rarely reflected in increased status in business and professional fields.

Despite their educational advancements, Women in the highest levels of government are the exception in all regions. In contrast, women have exercised increasing influence in non-governmental organizations. Though their participation in the labour force is increasing in all regions, women rarely account for more than 1 or 2 per cent of top executive business positions. In many countries women are well represented in the health and education professions, but most still work at the bottom levels of the status and wage hierarchy. Similarly, women are increasingly visible as media presenters and reporters, but remain poorly represented in the more influential media occupations, such as producers and editors. With the increasing literacy rates, women more and more celebrate those elements of the regional cultural diversity which enrich and strengthen the role of women in society and to transform those cultural practices which discriminate against women and which, at times, cause irreparable physical, psychological and social damage to women and girl-children.

2. Women's Participation in Politics

Women's political status has been improved significantly in East Asia. It has been accepted that women's participation in political decision-making is essential to bring for equity, equality and social justice. However, because of the lack of political will in some governments to empower women beyond statements of policy and legislation, women have been given inadequate attention in public and political participation. The number of women in parliaments is still limited. In order to promote further participation of women in politics and decision-making, government has to gear some effective stratagems.

Under the support of the international organizations the term affirmative action in this region appears to be widely known and accepted, although there are differing views held by some countries, such as Singapore, where meritocracy, rather than affirmative action, is preferred to increase women's representation in politics and in decision-making positions in government and public bodies. The quota system seems to bring significant progress if it is based on consensus among the parties concerned and is implemented robustly. For example, in Bangladesh, through a special provision, there are 30 seats reserved for women in the parliament to ensure their participation in politics, in addition to 300 elected seats. These measures have reportedly brought significant results.

Initiatives taken by the government can also be an effective tool. In Viet Nam, with government guidelines and provision of professional and managerial training given to women by various ministries and institutions, as well as with effective communications regarding elections to the National Assembly 10th Legislation (in 1997), women account for 26.22 per cent in the current legislature (1997-2002), from 18.48 per cent in the previous National Assembly legislature.)

Quota systems appear to be effective in increasing the number of women in power and decision-making roles in local government. It has been reported that, even with quota systems, some obstacles still exist. But it has been pointed out that entrenched power structures and traditional male-dominated social systems pose

problems for elected representatives to exercise their rights, and that without social and familial support, women cannot avail themselves of the quota system.

3. Trafficking and Violence against Women

In recent years, violence against women has emerged as a grave social problem in South East Asian countries. The problem is neither new nor unique to this region. Indeed, many types of violence against women prevail all over the world. However the problem has had little social recognition and legal redress because patriarchal values, traditions, norms, even laws discriminate against women and condone male violence against women. Women are subjected to physical, sexual, mental abuses and tortures in all social structures, in all of these countries. While actions to combat violence are being taken by the national governments and NGOs, there is a need for regional action as well to eliminate such violence as trafficking which is being conducted by organized gangs operating across borders. Any form of violation of women's rights is an act of violence and therefore, governments, NGOs, the private sector, and the community have to focus their attention on ensuring the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

The basic factor contributing to violence against women is prevalent patriarchal norms, values, tradition and customs which legitimize and maintain unequal power relation between men and women in all social structures — family, community, workplace and even in the state.

This is exacerbated by several other factors: increasing unemployment, poverty, stress and tension in male-female relations in poor households caused by the financial crisis have given rise to dowry, trafficking, prostitution, kidnapping. This has resulted in a perceived devaluation of women's contribution in economic terms and also has underscored the commodification of women and the commercial aspect of marriage transactions. The erosion of traditional means of income generation and support is also related to increase in trafficking and kidnapping of women and forced prostitution. Deepening poverty and increasing unemployment of women were resulting in more commodification as a greater supply of women sought to obtain "easy money". There has been an increased demand evidenced by growing tourism, including sex tourism, as a result in part of devalued currencies in the region. Some criminals even make use of information technology, especially the Internet, to market women as human commodities and for pornography.

The issues of effective programs for increasing women's income generation, poverty alleviation, and equitable distribution of resources by class, gender, and location are major ones in countering these factors. The most important of those was recognition of the economic dimension and the vast sums of money generated from the activity for the perpetrators. Recognizing the criminal dimension, where organized crime was very much involved, required that the issue of human security also be highlighted. That was considered particularly important in South East Asian countries where the element of duplicity - women being duped or deceived into trafficking - was a common feature.

V. Actions should be taken

As women's issues are more and more recognized by the world, so have the need and roles in economic development of women been acknowledged by the society. Although governments in this region and international organizations have made significant commitments related to these issues, some regressive elements towards women in such fields as politics, business, education, labor and industry still

exist. Therefore, there is a strong case for ensuring that policies that deal with the social impact of the crisis are designed to be gender-sensitive. The affected groups of women should be fully involved in the process of establishing protective institutions and in responding in general to the social effects of the crisis. There are three core goals related to the improvement of women's situation: poverty alleviation, employment expansion and education and training. Their relative significance varies according to the development situation and prospects of different countries.

Mitigating women's poverty, reducing violence against women, improving the status of women and children, increasing the percentage of participation in economic and political processes at national and local levels in the region can be fully achieved in a context that ensures international peace and domestic social harmony, the observance of human rights along with civic responsibilities, governance for promoting social development, sustained and equitable development and the creation of a favorable international economic environment. Without women's fully participation, it is not easy for the region to build 'firewall' against the human devastation like such crises cause.

1. Alleviating women from poverty

According the information of the World Bank, nearly two-thirds of the world's poor are in the Asian region, two-thirds of the region's poor are women. And poverty is particularly acute for women living in rural areas.

In poor families, the gender division of labor, and responsibilities for household welfare, mean that the burden of poverty falls most heavily on women. Given gender disparities in education, health care, economic participation, and incomes, women are the most vulnerable category.

The number of women living in poverty has increased disproportionately over the past decade, compared to the number of men. Male migration in search of work, and consequent changes in household structures, have placed additional burdens on women, especially those with several dependents. In the South East Asian region, the proportion of households headed by females holds larger percent rate than other parts of the world.

The increasing feminization of poverty is now a well-recognized trend. It has intensified with the recent Asian crisis, where adjustment programs tend to exacerbate women's hardships, and in the economies in transition as a short-term consequence of political, economic, and social transformation. The disproportionate numbers of women among the poor pose serious constraints to human and social development because their children are more likely to repeat cycles of poverty and disadvantage. Improving the political, legal, cultural, economic, and social status of women is thus crucial to escaping the poverty trap. Since most crisis-induced unemployment among women is an important cause of poverty and violence, an unemployment assistance system with widespread coverage, even one with very thin pay out rates, would automatically have provided a significant measure of relief for a large number of woman victims of the crisis, with secondary benefits to social stability and aggregate demand.

Hence, Governments, especially in low-income countries, should pay particular attention to strengthening the technical capabilities for assessment of women's social situation, problem-solving analyses and development of workable options for prompt action. Furthermore, suitable mechanisms, institutions, training needs of staff, procedures, and operational guidelines will need to be identified and established.

Therefore, in order to attain the goal of alleviation of feminization poverty, governments should give particular attention, among other factors, to:

(i) Prioritizing programs to empower the “hard-core” poor women through accessing to necessary resources such as credit, technology, improving leadership and entrepreneurial capacities and legislative support to promote their full participation and livelihood;

(ii) Formulating policies to address rural poor women through appropriate fiscal policies, commodity pricing and improving wage or self-employment in both agricultural and non-agricultural-based activities;

(iii) Strengthening social protection schemes for employment expansion, providing and strengthening social security and safety nets for the most vulnerable women;

(iv) Supporting the growth of the informal sector of the economy through incentives and a regulatory framework to stimulate enterprise formation, improving access to credit and technologies, and fostering linkages between the informal and formal sectors.

2. Provide education and training programs

Strengthening the capacities of women is an integral part of social development. The interventions should help to build the skills and capacities of the individual woman, and strengthen their capabilities to organize and manage their affairs in groups and communities. Training, technical assistance and other forms of support will be required to help to build the capacity of women. This would require not only the delivery of goods and services, but also improving access to information and increasing awareness.

Education for women was not a one-time event in life, but an on-going process that should enable women to play an active role in the labor market. High-quality general education for girls, and remedial education and training for adult women, who form the majority of the world's illiterate population, were necessary to meet employment challenges.

In addition, women should have equal access to training programs that offer a high personal pay-off and increase social and economic power. Thus, the need to design training systems that respond to the complexities of the current labor market, taking into account the increased employment of women in export processing zones, and the informal sector should be further stressed on. While diversified types of training, including in non-traditional fields is necessary, the establishment of paths for promotion and better wages in sectors of predominantly female employment should be supported. Any training package for women should include training in legal literacy, empowerment, and preparation for leadership and decision-making.

Training of female personnel should aim at increasing their knowledge of social issues providing the analytical and technical skills necessary to diagnose social development problems, and evolve policy and program measures through increased understanding of the linkages between the economic and social sectors. The knowledge and skills of female dominated front-line functionaries in social development such as teachers, health workers, and community organizers should also be upgraded.

The full empowerment of women is predicated on the elimination of any and all barriers to the education and training of women and the girl child, including the revision of curricula to ensure that they are gender-sensitive. With a global vision that the employment practices of the future are going to be different from those of the

past, governments must take the necessary steps to ensure compliance with social and economic development.

3. Promote women's self-reliance

Women in East Asia have made significant progress in terms of education, participation in economic activity and social status. However, they have a long way to go as far as advancement to top decision-making positions is concerned. They must assume responsibility for their own advancement but their ability to do this will be enhanced where governments and employers create enabling environments.

In order to strengthen existing mechanisms and to introduce new ones to protect and advance the interests of women in a rapidly changing world, women in East Asia therefore should commit themselves to translating their vision for the world, the region and themselves into a living reality; to strive for state and civil societies recognizing women's entitlement to the full range of personal and social rights available to men; to find means to ensure that governments, societies and individuals adhere to non-violent forms of conflict resolution and respect the human dignity and rights of women affected by conflict and violence; strengthen harmony in family unit, as the smallest social institution where development and democracy starts; to promote sharing, and harmonious communication within and among families serving as the strong pillars of a peace and democracy loving society. Only in this way can women stand up right by themselves and make living by self-reliance.

Governments, international organizations and civil society should reaffirm their commitment to equality, development and peace through the effective implementation of human rights instruments; to ensure that women have control over all aspects of their lives including their sexuality as well as equal representation in decision-making at all levels and in all spheres, including leadership positions and governance structures; to re-examine and re-orient macro economic and development policies to ensure the protection of women's human rights and to redress the growing feminization of violence; to identify and eliminate discriminatory employment practices in all areas and sectors, and monitor compliance with employment legislation designed to facilitate the advancement of women in decision-making positions.

Finally, governments of the region should encourage women to establish self confidence, to help them move from the conflict, inequality and injustices which distinguish this region towards the principles of mutual respect, equality and justice reflected in the vision shared by the women of the region.

4. Apply Information and Communication Technology to Empower Women

Most women in East Asia, especially in developing countries, are not able to access effectively the expanding electronic information highways, and therefore, they cannot establish networks that will provide them with information necessary to improve their lives. Recognizing importance of technological changes in electronic communications, policy makers and organizations at all levels are conceivable to assist in increasing the possibilities for women to express their opinions and take part in decision-making through the media and the new technologies as a means of strengthening women's participation in political processes and then fully identify the need for access, training and network development for women.

Using new information technologies to establish mechanisms and data pool related with women's issues for information sharing should be undertaken. Information on social development and training materials on the various social

development goals and targets, national situations and emerging issues and plans for addressing them should be prepared and shared with the various actors involved, including the concerned female groups.

Support should be given to research and academic organizations to enable them to undertake independent analysis of problems with feminization development and recommend appropriate approaches to deal with them. These should also be geared to capability building, curriculum building, and skill training through new information technologies.

VI. Conclusion

By directing public resources toward policies and programs that reduce gender inequality, policymakers need not only promote equality but also raise the social security and safety nets, to increase their coverage and access to those lay-off women. Since much of the region is affected, the combined potential of social problems from desperate unemployed workers and the new poor pose a threat to national, as well as regional, stability. Women are always victims of such instability. Therefore, it is important to give equal attention to the social impacts of the financial and economic crisis, to ensure that gender concerns are taken into account, particularly to develop and implement social safety net programs for the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

However, none of these developments can be sustained without the participation of women themselves. Governments and collaborating institutions must listen more carefully to the voices of individual women, including policymakers, and to women's groups. Through working with the whole region to identify and implement policies that promote gender equality, governments can make a real difference to the future sustainable development of this region.

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