“Challenges to Implementing CEDAW in Southeast Asia”

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INTRODUCTION:

Imagine a strong silent women holding the hands of more children than she can feed, a frail smiling women selling fruit, or a young girl lacking all opportunities and still managing to dream of knowledge. You have began the process of seeing the struggles that women face in Southeast Asia and the very burdens that CEDAW seeks to make less common. Within this report we will be examining the countries of Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, China, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia. These countries became state parties to the Convention on the Elimination Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) during the 1980’s and mid 1990’s and since then, they have been fairly committed to upholding the articles of the convention. Within the region constitutions have been amended, legislation has been passed, and culture, a strong traditional code, has come under scrutiny. Enforcement continues to be a pertinent issue and governments and civic organizations are still working to strengthen its implementation. We have identified the five most pressing issues that women face in Southeast Asia: Domestic Roles and Violence, Reproductive Health and Rights, the Informal Economy, the Formal Economy, and Education. Women still have long leaps to make in order to gain full equality in Southeast Asia, but by signing onto the CEDAW, governments have crossed the first barrier to giving women a just future, and that is recognizing a need for reform and change.
DOMESTIC ROLES

Southeast Asian culture and traditions promote well-defined behavioral stereotypes for Southeast Asian women. In countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, Buddhist interpretations support women’s gender roles. In Malaysia and Indonesia, Muslim interpretations support women’s gender roles and in the Philippines, strict Catholicism interpretations support women’s gender roles. The stereotype of women is very similar throughout the region, varying in degree among countries. Southeast Asian women are expected to be subservient, gentle, self-effacing, and obedient. Traditionally a woman’s role is to make her husband happy, attend to the household, and rear children. For example, Cambodian society has a traditional moral code of behavior called *Chbab Srei*, or “Code of Women”, which states that women must serve their husbands at all times and only if they strive to uphold *Chbab Srei* they will be rewarded. The non-profit Institut d’Études Internationales de Montréal released a report called, “Status of Cambodian Women,” asserting that the principle of Chabab Srei permits discrimination against women in many spheres of living. Although traditional, the women code is still embedded in Cambodian everyday activities and being taught to young girls in school is perpetuating it.

Many Southeast Asian countries have issues with women and divorce. Muslim law in Malaysia requires men and women to get the court’s permissions divorce but women have to go through a much longer process than men. In addition, the only way for women to receive alimony is if she is following her husband’s wishes meaning the divorce is on his terms. Women are often
deterred from divorce because without alimony, it is very difficult for women to economically provide for their children (CEDAW Malaysia Report). In the Philippines divorce is illegal. Women are allowed to separate from their husbands but separation requires the woman to be financially independent which is almost impossible in the Philippines, and separation is also looked down upon in the Philippines’ strong Catholic society (CEDAW Philippines Report).

To address the stereotype issues, the Southeast Asian countries are applying strategies such as education, legal framework and changes with in the media. As a result of CEDAW, most countries in South/Southeast Asia and China have created laws that imply a high level of equality among men and women. Vietnam has created laws and polices such as the Marriage and Family Law to ensure equality, especially on shared land-use rights by declaring that all valuable properties owned by Vietnamese must be registered in the names of the husband and the wife. Vietnam also strongly emphasizes men’s responsibly in family planning and emphasizes men sharing the burden of domestic work (CEDAW Vietnam Country Report). Most Southeast Asian countries have enacted legislation or amendments that directly connote the equality of men and women.

Thailand is trying to change stereotypes about women through education reform and the decentralizing of the government. The education reform will be a curriculum reform, teaching and learning reform, teacher and educational personal reform, and monitoring and evaluation reform (CEDAW Thailand Report). As mentioned in their CEDAW reports, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Laos,
and Indonesia are also addressing stereotypes through education by attempting to discontinue detrimental stereotypes, specifically in textbooks and curriculum.

As a result of the countries’ efforts, in urban areas, traditional roles of women have been gradually modified especially in China but traditional stereotypes are still rooted in rural Southeast Asia. In Vietnam patriarchy and Confucian ideology are still deeply imbedded and women continue to be involved in house work. Politics is for the men (Vietnam Shadow Report). Thailand’s educational reform is criticized because the reform actually does not mention anything about encouraging equality between men and women or teaching non-discrimination (Thailand’s NGO). Another common criticism is that despite the legal framework for equality, the laws are artificial because local government and authorities still conform to traditional gender stereotypes.

Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country that has signed the optional protocol. Additionally, two countries still have reservations about CEDAW. Malaysia still has two reservations to the CEDAW document. The first is about article 5(a) concerning modifying social and cultural patterns to eliminate prejudices, practices, and customs that infer the inferiority of women. The second reservation is about article 7(b) concerning women participating in the formulation of government policy and implementation. CEDAW commends Thailand, but even Thailand has a reservation to Article 16 concerning laws related to marriage and the family (CEDAW Declarations). Despite the countries’ efforts in establishing equality, Thailand and all other Southeast Asian countries still have strong held cultural stereotypes about women that are resulting in
discrimination. This type of rooted belief is the hardest to address. The gender stereotypes are also the root of many other issues in Southeast Asia. The countries seem to be making subsequent efforts towards reducing gender stereotypes and many of the countries’ efforts in reforming educational stereotypes may show results in the future.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

World Bank analysis indicates that sixty percent of all Asian women have been assaulted. According to CEDAW, in Vietnam, eighty percent of women have suffered from some type of domestic violence. The high frequency of domestic abuse in Southeast Asia is directly correlated to Southeast Asian gender stereotypes and the cultural importance of the patriarchal family. In accordance with the traditional patriarchic family, women are supposed to submit to men where wives submit to their husbands, and daughters submit to their fathers. Hence traditional Southeast Asian culture does not view domestic violence as a problem. In some Southeast Asian countries such as China and Cambodia domestic violence is viewed as a common aspect of the culture (CEDAW Cambodia/China Country Reports). Additionally, if South Asian traditional culture does view domestic violence as a problem, the abuse is a private issue among the family instead of an issue to address publicly.

Women’s traditional stereotypes also prevent women from reporting domestic violence. Reporting domestic violence incidents can result in shame and is culturally viewed as failure of the women to be a good wife, thus not only
bringing shame to their immediate family but also to their father and mother. Even when confronted, women will deny they are being domestically abused. For example in Cambodia the Ministry of Women’s Affairs surveyed 3000 women in 13 providences and of those surveyed, eighty percent of women said they knew women who were being domestically abused but only twenty five percent of those women said they had experience domestic violence themselves (CEDAW shadow report). Another issue is that even if women report domestic violence, in most Southeast Asian countries local authorities do not take the report seriously.

To address these issues under article 5 of CEDAW, Southeast Asian countries have relied heavily on new legal framework. Most Southeast Asian countries added laws that addressed domestic violence and punishments for violators. The Philippines passed the Anti-violence Against women and laws that penalized rape and sexual assault. Malaysia passed a Domestic Violence Act providing protection for battered and abused women including restraining orders for those being abused and the option to re-enter the residence with an officer to collect belongings. They are also offered the right to regularly use a vehicle (CEDAW Malaysia Country Report).

Southeast Asian countries have also adopted programs to coincide with the legal actions addressing domestic violence. In Thailand’s CEDAW report, it states that the Thai government has endorsed eight measures towards solving domestic violence including the suppression of pornography, involvement in sex education, improvement of services to victimized women, and quickening the process of establishing centers for assisting women in crisis in public hospitals.
The Philippines Social Welfare Department runs a Crisis Intervention Unit with a 24-hour phone hotline. The program offers counseling over the phone, carries out rescue operations, refers victims to the appropriate agencies, and additional types of support. Associated with the Crisis Intervention Unit are 12 homes offering shelter for women and girl victims of domestic violence (CEDAW Philippines Country Report).

Other Southeast Asian countries are focusing on the media and how it affects domestic violence. In Cambodia the government is attempting to eliminate the negative images of women in the mass media (CEDAW Cambodian Country Report). In China the media is being used as a tool to address domestic violence through special coverage of typical court cases of violations regarding women’s rights and interests, such as domestic violence, illegal detention of women, abducting and trafficking of women, and organized public discussions of issues concerning domestic violence and violence against women. The media covers topics including how to protect oneself from domestic violence. The purpose of the media involvement is to inform women of ways to deal with the domestic violence problem. In 2002, the Chinese media launched a series of television programs on domestic violence, which aroused much interest among the public (CEDAW China Country Report).

Despite NGO and governments enacting laws and preventive campaigns, domestic violence is still a common occurrence in Southeast Asia. Thai Women Watch’s Shadow Report equates domestic violence fundamental problems to the traditional attitude and sexual prejudice of government officials and the result is
that laws, polices, actions, and measures do not have as strong of impact and are not enough to end domestic violence. This is exemplified by the fact that domestic violence in Thailand is on the rise. Even though the Philippines instituted anti-violence laws and established a crisis hotline, an article from The Women’s International Perspective describes how domestic violence still goes unreported due to embarrassment and the idea that the violence was unimportant or the feeling that nothing will be done anyway. The laws and actions enacted by Southeastern countries’ governments are not addressing the root of the domestic violence problem. In Cambodia domestic violence reporting has increased and the law is sufficient but “a culture of impunity, unfair legal and judicial processes and a lack of governmental assistance contribute to women continuing to suffer from violence” (CEDAW shadow report on Cambodia).

Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia do not recognize marital rape. The countries’ laws only reprimand rape that is acted on a woman other than a man’s wife. In Ache Indonesia, the CEDAW shadow report informs that state laws allow women to be publicly flogged if they violate mandates on being too close to a man, drinking, or gambling.

Violence against women is one of the principal issues in Southeast Asia. Someone close to them abuses the majority of women. Domestic violence is very familiar in Southeast Asia’s informal sector and domestic foreign workers where women are the most vulnerable. Domestic violence also traumatizes children and in the home is where young boys and girls learn gender roles. Behind closed doors boys view their fathers abusing their mothers or their sisters and the cycle
of domestic abuse is perpetuated. It is important to recognize in a region that strongly promotes family, family structure takes precedent over law.

**REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND HEALTH**

In Southeast Asia gender discrimination and culture have severely limited women’s power over their own bodies, health, and future of their children. In Article 12 of the CEDAW Convention it states: “State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care service, including those related to family planning”. However, this does not carry much weight in Southeast Asia when held against the light of culture. The right for someone to have control over their own body and health is among the most essential human rights and the reality is that women within the region have been guarded against access to family planning, adequate health education, and a voice. In a patriarchal society, women’s reproductive rights have been stifled both at the governmental and family levels. However, the CEDAW country reports outline programs that governments within the region have enacted in order to break down cultural barriers and better educate women about family planning. Whether there is a correlation between CEDAW and reality is largely debatable.

Throughout a region of the world where women have historically provided sex for military personal, informal markets have labeled themselves as “sex paradises”, and media and culture has (if I may) sexified, objectified, and
exotically portrayed the Asian woman; the consequence is high levels of HIV/AIDS among women. Surprisingly, CEDAW reveals that HIV/AIDS is more common among housewives than prostitutes and sex traffickers within the region (CEDAW Report Malaysia). For example, in Malaysia 44% of women with HIV/AIDS are housewives. A lack of adequate knowledge about reproductive health and a lack of negotiating power with their husbands about their sexual rights and reproductive options are the main reason women are vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). The shadow report for Cambodia also asserts that housewives in rural areas are the most vulnerable group to new infections and often will not seek help because they are too shy and do not have sufficient resources to see a physician. Campaigns and reproductive health education are not conducted in remote areas such as Stun Treing, Tattanakiri and Mondorkiri. (Shadow Report Cambodia)

The issue of HIV/AIDS is a consequence of cultural subordination against women and the failure of Southeast Asian governments to transcend the programs they have designed within the CEDAW reports from the urban cities to the rural villages. For example, the Philippine’s CEDAW report states that in 2000, the ratios of government health workers to the population were one doctor per 9,797 people and one midwife per 4,503. If the number of health workers are so ultimately limited, they naturally will be located in areas of larger populations, leaving the rural woman geographically and economically stranded from accessing professional healthcare. The disparity between the rural and urban areas concerning reproductive health programs, rights, and knowledge is a
consistent trend; programs take root in cities where women are present within policy but as they spread to local governments, women are less represented and issues that empower women are buried under the more “important issues”.

Successful programs that have created change in contraceptive use within Southeast Asia have involved targeting adolescents from ages 15-25 and educating them about safe sex, family planning, STIs, and women’s rights. In Thailand, sex education was an added curriculum under the title “Future Family Planning” and focuses on physical, mental, social and cultural features covered in morals, gender roles, and sex issues. Thailand’s “Think Sex, Think condom” campaign rose contraception rate to 79.2% among young women, Thai and foreign sex workers, drug addicts and the underprivileged (CEDAW country report Thailand). In most of the region women are responsible for family planning practices and must bear the costs and side effects of contraception. Another trend is that women must have the consent of their husband before sterilization, and in some cases such as the rural Philippines decisions about contraception are entirely made by the male spouse.

Lack of knowledge and access to healthcare has deadly consequences; it results in high mortality rates among women in remote areas. Maternal mortality rate in Laos is a major issue, where only one out of four women visits a prenatal care facility during the early stages of her pregnancy and 40 percent of women prefer giving birth at home without help. However, programs focusing on rural access are changing mortality rates among the poorest women. In Malaysia more than 56 % of pregnant women suffer anemia, which can increase infant
mortality. The 1996 Health Program created rural healthcare clinics, which have lowered maternal deaths to 30/100,000. The rural initiative, installed to meet CEDAW standards, grants rural women access to professional midwives, efficient referral systems, and free transportation to health clinics. This is a model that should and could be adapted to other countries throughout Southeast Asia. China’s health care is also focusing more on the rural area and in recent years maternal mortality rates have decreased by 6-7% per 100,000 each year (CEDAW Country Report China).

Many of the maternal mortalities are due to complications from undergoing illegal abortions. In countries where there is not enough food or money to feed their children, women are faced with the decision between bringing a starving child into the world or committing a criminal and punishable act, abortion. Abortion is illegal throughout the region (disregarding Vietnam). Nevertheless, in China where it is legal, it is forced. China is the outlier when concerning reproductive rights throughout the region. While most countries use religious and cultural groups to illegalize abortion and limit access to family planning, the Chinese government has legalized forced abortion as part of its one-child policy. This has spawned the worst form of marginalization of women; it literally refuses them the opportunity to live: sex-selective abortions. According to a 1999 Planned Parenthood Federation report, between 500,000 and 750,000 unborn girls were voluntarily aborted in China annually under the one-child policy. In a 2002 survey conducted in a central China village, more than 300 of 820 women had abortion and they try to choose the babies’ sex. The CEDAW country report
for China romanticizes their role with women’s rights: “China has incorporated maternal and child health care in its Ninth Five-Year Plan for social and economic development (1996-2000), which calls for increased investment in maternal and child care and greater efforts to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates.” While legalized abortion allows abortion to be conducted in a monitored medical environment, it has long lasting effects on the physical, mental, and emotional health of women.

The most extreme cases of collisions between culture and illegal abortion can be seen in the Philippines and Malaysia. The Philippines is a Catholic country and it illegalized abortion and at a policy level in 2002 the President and health department prioritized natural family planning (value of church). This basically counteracts all reproductive health care programs inspired within CEDAW and has given local governments the power to implement their own decisions about abortion and contraceptive use. Policy Innovations news source reports that in 2007 many towns such as Manilla have banned contraception from all health clinics. In Malaysia Islamic clerics and religious law are the major obstacle for implementing CEDAW because they advocate abstinence as the only method of family planning. In a country where violence against women is prominent and culture praises that submissiveness among women will be rewarded, women often do not have a choice in maintaining abstinence. The law states that abortions are illegal, except when the life of the mother is endangered (secular law). Abortions are illegal after 120 days unless mother’s life is endangered (Muslim law- not adopted by government and not publicized).
Punishment for abortions are: with woman’s consent fine plus 3 years in prison for doctor and patient: if death of patient occurs, 10 years in prison for the doctor: if the abortion was done without patient consent and death ensure it is 20 years in prison for the doctor. Ads for abortion are illegal and punishable with 3000-5000 RM fine and 1-2 years in prison.

A shadow report to the CEDAW report for Indonesia suggests that there need to be an amendment to regulations that penalize the act of aborting pregnancy, and the opening up of access to medication for people living with HIV/AIDS”. It later adds that programs could be implemented through public educational programs. These important realizations should be an active part of the country reports throughout Southeast Asia, not the shadow documents. While the reports acknowledge the role of culture, the shadow reports emphasize the enormous influence that religious and patriarchal culture have over women’s access and decision making about contraception. While social programs, women’s education, and policy may make advancements towards women’s rights, they are and will continue to be limited by culture until there are efforts to change the way culture views women’s empowerment and inherent value.

Vietnam appears to be the positive outlier in the region concerning women’s reproductive health because they have truly strived to integrate GAD into their governmental and social policies. Throughout Vietnam all women are entitled to maternity leave and natal allowance, no matter now many births they have given (CEDAW country report Vietnam). During maternal leave, female workers that have paid social insurance shall receive allowances, which equal
100% of the salary, one extra month salary, and other social benefits. While not all women can afford social benefits, another law states “enterprises and organizations mush assign other jobs suitable for pregnant women if necessary”. Beyond maternal leave, life expectancy has increased significantly for women, maternal/child mortality has decreased, and the cost of medical attention and treatment have been decreased so even poor women can afford attention. Perhaps most importantly, Vietnam distinguishes itself through CEDAW by utilizing grassroots activities such as Women’s Unions to spread gender equality through urban and rural areas. While they affirm that they still have problems and obstacles to overcome, I believe that they are the best example throughout the region of implementing the convention’s goals into the social realities of women.

**INFORMAL ECONOMY**

It's a business that generates millions, billions, even trillions in the local currency, adding significant funds to the GDP of most of the countries in Southeast Asia. It "employs" hundreds of thousands of women and children in this area of the world. It is a highly desired commodity, not only by the local males, but also by western white males who come to the countries in Southwest Asia as "tourists". In fact, in Thailand, male tourists outnumber female tourists by twenty percent. In the Philippines the women working in this market are labeled as "entertainers", but rather they are prostitutes and more often than not, their employment is not voluntary.

In Southeast Asia, Article Six of the CEDAW convention, which states, "States
Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women", has been a bit difficult to enforce. All of the Southeast Asian countries listed are participating in the CEDAW convention and have agreed to implement measures aimed at decreasing the prevalence of the sex industry. But, despite legislation against trafficking being passed in most of the countries, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines continue to be hubs for transporting women from all over the area to other Southeast Asian countries and even western countries, like Australia, Canada and the United States. Many of these women are sold as "mail-order brides". A large percentage of these women end up being sex slaves, having been kidnapped or coerced into prostitution.

One of the major obstacles to combating the problem of prostitution in this region is the cultural attitude about rape. Virginity, in all of the above countries, is highly valued and if a woman is raped she is considered unclean and ostracized. Many teenage women are raped and then rejected by their family, thus making them vulnerable to pimps and brothel/den owners offering work and decent money, therefore, large percentages of women prostitutes (in Malaysia it is half and in Cambodia 35 percent) are in fact under the age of eighteen. To add insult to injury, many of these girls or women do not actually see the money they make. Abuses of these women are rampant and horrifying. Some are kept in small rooms and never let outside. Severe beatings and multiple rapes are a common occurrence.

Another obstacle to eliminating the sex-trade in Southeast Asia is the blatant
lack of enforcement to any anti-trafficking laws that are in place. In China, government officials in fact have been known to "have their hand in the cookie jar", financially benefiting from being part owners in brothels or taking bribes. There are large organized crime rings involved in such activity and the money to be made and indeed is made makes it extremely hard to for the governments to truly want to combat such an economically feasible enterprise.

In China, there is a unique situation pertaining to its one-child policy. Due to low numbers of women for wives, many young women are being kidnapped, mainly from rural areas, and sold as wives to wealthy urban men. This policy has also increased the number of prostitutes due to an increased number of men with a need for sexual gratification. China, however, has no plans to reverse the one-child policy until 2050.

In Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia and the Philippines prostitution is not specifically illegal, while in China, Laos and Vietnam prostitution is illegal. All of the countries have implemented anti-trafficking laws and many are trying to work together, having signed inter-country contracts that state they will help one another, such as the Inter-Agency Committee between Malaysia and Indonesia to address the trafficking issues. All the countries, per CEDAW requests, have stated that they shall be working harder at enforcing the laws they currently have. In Malaysia for instance, the police have begun conducting inspections and securing girls. China, as well, has begun to conduct massive raids and has rescued thousands of kidnapped women and children in the last couple years. The prosecution of pimps, brothel owners and those who engage in buying sex,
still tends to be very low, however. The punishment for breaking the laws is weak. In Thailand, having sex with a girl under eighteen only imposes a sentence of one to three years in prison. Under the age of fifteen can get the offender two to six years. The trafficking laws tend to have stiffer punishments. In Malaysia, being convicted of trafficking can put the offender in prison for up to five years and a stiff fine is included. In China, if one is found guilty of being the leader of an organized crime sex-ring, then the punishment is death. In the Philippines, trafficking punishment can range from six years to life imprisonment with a fine of half a million to two million pesos (this includes those who sell mail-order brides). In Cambodia, trafficking of another person is punishable by ten to fifteen years in prison; fifteen to twenty if that person is under age fifteen. This is what is says on "the books", however, bringing such people to court rarely occurs. In fact, in Cambodia (despite its decent punishment for trafficking in law) many judges and lawyers are not aware of CEDAW. The country ratified it in 1992, but it has yet to be translated in the Khmer language. The government is currently working to address this problem, and with NGO assistance, has set up seminars to educate legal officers in the country.

Almost all of the countries in Southeast Asia have established (with NGO assistance) rehabilitation centers for prostitutes (this is not the case in Laos). They tend to offer education, counseling, and vocational training. In Vietnam, jobs were even created for former prostitutes. Also, along with NGO assistance, many of the countries have implemented awareness programs, to rural populations in particular, to the dangers of prostitution and teach wariness about
men trying to exhort young women into the profession. In Thailand, there are organizations that try to educate women about life in foreign countries and to be aware of the techniques foreigners are using to lure women abroad. Vietnam is even using media by raising awareness using radio and TV ads and conducting seminars. They have also established the Women's Unions (there are very few NGOs allowed in Vietnam), which are raising awareness at a community level about the dangers of prostitution. China has also relied on media to help educate about prostitution.

Of course there are the extremes on both sides about how to address the prostitution issue. There are some women who choose prostitution as a profession. These women have managed to work for themselves and quite like the money they make. In China, there is a push by such "professionals" to make prostitution legal. There is a similar request in Thailand to make prostitution "an honest occupation" for women with little education. On the other side of extremism, Cambodia has even gone so far as to issue a directive (in November 2007) to discontinue having bars, nightclubs, discotheques and Karaoke (which tend to cater to the sex-industry).

Obviously, despite all the laws and the signatures on the CEDAW convention contract, many improvements still need to be made. A large percentage of them are simply on changing cultural attitudes. For families to realize that rape is not a choice their daughters make and to be accepting and supportive when such an atrocity does happen. Reporting sex crimes and criminals needs to be easier and taken more seriously by enforcement authorities and judicial officials. And
although there are exceptions, punishments for sex crimes need to be stiffer in many of the countries in Southeast Asia. However, prostitution isn't the only informal economy for women in this area.

While the urban centers in Southeast Asia get plenty of attention, Southeast Asia is still mainly agricultural in nature. This is where many informal economies are occurring for women for this region and why Article 14 of the CEDAW convention, which addresses the needs of rural women, is so important. For many of the rural women life in Southeast Asia is difficult. Numerous women have husbands that leave to urban centers for jobs and are rarely home, thus the wife, in addition to raising the children and the housework, must manage the work on the farms. To complicate matters, often times the money coming home from the husband is inadequate to live off of. Thus, additional income needs to be generated. In the Philippines and Thailand, some women resell clothing they have purchased wholesale. In all the countries there are women who operate eateries or stores. Others take in laundry or sewing at home. There are even some who carve wood and make furniture. This is in addition to farming and managing their household. In Malaysia the number of women doing this has doubled from 1995-2001. In the Philippines this number has risen from 39 percent in 1996 to 42 percent in 2001. In Vietnam, 71 percent of women are engaged in this kind of work. One of the ways Vietnam is trying to help in this informal economy is to set up rural markets (there are currently 5,000) so that the women can sell their goods to each other without needing to venture into the urban centers. This of course promotes the local economy and probably has the
consequence of establishing a network of women in similar situations and the possibility of support among them. In Indonesia and Thailand rural women are encouraged and sometimes recruited to be involved in local cooperatives and in community development.

Micro-credit loans to women for establishing small business ventures out of their homes has proven to be a very effective way of increasing the income for a portion of rural women. Since it is so effective and popular, many of the Southeast Asian governments have allowed their national bank to grant small loans to rural women. Vietnam has found, however, that due to "limited understandings and inadequate management skills and a lack of ability to form an effective business plan" can cause problems for some women to maintain their businesses. Therefore, in addition to just the financial support, many of the national banks, along with other financial institutions in the states contributing to microfinance, have set up training and education about how to manage the money loaned to ensure success. China has had great success with this, lifting 4.6 million rural Chinese women out of poverty.

Not all of these women have their husbands employed in the urban centers. Some assist their husbands on the farm and in preparing the food for market. In just about all of the Southeast Asian countries, this involves rice cultivation, in which rural women play huge roles. Another preparation of food includes fish as well, which needs to be clean, gutted and cut. This tends to fall under "women's work". In Cambodia this type of work accounts for 53 percent of the work women do. One of the solutions in many of the countries is to train and educate the
women (as well as the men) in more modern agricultural techniques, so that time is saved and the workload decreased. However, with the exception of Vietnam, which has set up rural markets, and Malaysia, which requires urban market vendors to be licensed, not many of the countries in this region are doing much more than microfinance, training and educating young girls. Vietnam is definitely on to something. If the rural communities can generate more of an income on a local level in the form of markets, not just cooperatives and training seminars, then some forms for poverty can be eliminated or at least decreased.

The informal economy in Southeast Asia is predominately in the sex-industry and due to CEDAW and other international agencies putting pressure on the economically viable beast that is the Southeast Asian sex-industry and bringing the issue to the global forefront, it is possible that the pervasiveness of this type of informal economy will be dramatically less in fifty years. Also, in regards to the informal economies of the rural population in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam model of rejuvenating the local economies with the involvement of women, should be implemented all over the region. This can only have a positive effect on the regions rural women and their empowerment.

**Formal Economy and Politics**

Formal economic and political figures for women in South-East Asia are particularly considered to be important by each country, because these figures are most prominent to people outside a South-East Asian country when observing the current conditions of gender equality. Thus, in order to show the
country’s achievement, the governments try to incorporate the idea of gender equality in formal economy and politics. In all Southeast Asian countries, notions of gender equality are embedded in constitutions, laws, and policy-making processes on the legislative level. For example, the law requires a company to provide maternity leave; the law requires equal pay between men and women; any institutions and enterprises are not supposed to discriminate against women for any reason. In fact, statistically, compared to some “advanced” countries, such as Japan and the U.S., many countries in South-East Asia surprisingly have high rates of women’s participation in top professional careers: Supreme Court judges (22% in Viet Nam; 4/15 in the Philippines; 2/6 in Malaysia), the Courts and Justice system (27% in the Philippines), lawyers (20% in Viet Nam; 3189 in Malaysia), political candidates (Thailand), parliament (27.1% in Viet Nam; 11.52% in Cambodia), government cabinet, senators (27.4% in Malaysia), etc (except in Cambodia where only 7% of all judges are female). In addition, women make up a great percentage of the labor force (65% in Cambodia; 44% in Thailand; 46.7% in Malaysia; 50% in Laos). However, in reality, the introduction of gender legislation and the high percentage of professional females are simply superficial. According to each country’s CEDAW and shadow reports conducted by NGOs, the gender mainstreaming is not deeply implemented on a practical level, and there are great numbers of problems that have to be addressed.

First of all, the legislation of gender equality is not deeply implemented in every day practices because of cultural ideology: strong remaining traditional expectations for each gender. The traditional notion that men inhabit the public
sphere and that women inhabit the private sphere still plays an influential role, especially in rural areas and among ethnic minorities. For example, family members do not encourage their daughters to become politically active. Thus, although women want to be candidates, there is no family support for elections. In addition, on a community level, there is stigmatization of working women since women are “not supposed to work” outside their household domains. More importantly, there is the sexual prejudice of government officials, elites, and senior leadership. Often, they are unfamiliar with the importance of notions of gender equality. For instance, in Cambodia, many leaders are not yet fully aware of the existence of CEDAW.

Next, gender problems are examined not only on an ideological level but also on a practical level. Even though many women hold national government positions, they are not represented effectively in local government and local decision-making processes. Also, even though some women finally occupy high status jobs, many suffer sexual harassment. In addition, although statistics show that women are “active” in the formal economy, most of the women’s labor force is unskilled. For instance, these jobs include manufacturing (foreign-owned), service sector, hospitality, trade, clerical, agriculture, and fishery (many women in local areas are associated with agriculture; in Vietnam women make up 70-80% of the agricultural workforce). Working conditions for women are particularly poor. Those who work in factories are suffering the damage of pesticides, lead, and long hours of work. Also, wages are usually far less than men’s (33% less in Cambodia shadow report; 77% of men’s wages in Laos). Furthermore, it is
difficult to get a job if a woman is married or pregnant. For instance, some women have to hide their marriages in China to be employed, because it is hard to find jobs for married women. Also, women get fired easily; especially this is the case for older women. Then, low job security makes it difficult for them to get a new job.

Another noticeable trend in Southeast Asian countries is the significant gap between rural and urban areas. Rural, ethnic minority, and single-headed household women are the most vulnerable due to a lack of education, vocational training, health care, and remaining strong traditional beliefs about gender roles. Most rural women do agricultural work; some of them do subsistence agriculture; others are hired. Many women migrate from rural to urban areas or even to foreign countries due to the lack of working opportunities in rural areas besides agriculture. However, most jobs in urban areas and foreign countries are domestics or “entertainers” (7.4 million Filipinos work abroad, and 63% are women). Because of strong traditional beliefs that women have to stay at home and do domestics, women suffer a double-burden which means that women have to do both domestics and outside work. Also, in rural areas, men usually go to the city to find work, so additional agricultural work and housework is imposed on women.

Sometimes, regulations and education that try to empower and protect women cause problems for women. Some regulations, including those on women’s age of retirement, jobs that are prohibited or limited for women (no night work {Philippines}, no 10pm-5am work {Malaysia}, no underground work
{Malaysia}), are in fact putting many female laborers in a disadvantaged positions. In addition, it seems that education only works for elite or rich women who have access to higher education. That is why there are a few women occupying high professional jobs, and most other women occupying unskilled jobs. No women occupy the middle layer, such as businesswomen. Therefore, as long as policy makers urgently encourage educational programs for ethnic minorities and rural women, the gap within the female population grows greatly.

In order to resolve the problems and concerns that have been discussed above, we could find some similar challenges that have been addressed by many South-East Asian countries. The governments try to provide more solid vocational training of professional skills for women and try to increase women’s management positions. Also, for rural women and ethnic minorities, they provide training for technological skills, such as agriculture or fields where there are many female graduates. In addition, a monitoring system is encouraged in order to make sure that institutions treat women equally. So, this system also makes enterprises sensitive to pregnant women’s needs and the issues of sexual harassment. More importantly, the policy makers try to educate officials and leaders of agencies on gender mainstreaming. This leads to the exclusion of traditional norms on gender roles, especially for rural and ethnic minorities, which is the most problematic throughout the Southeast Asian region.
EDUCATION

In the areas of Southeast/East Asia, most countries have generally tried to improve the education system for men, women, and people in rural and urban areas equally according to CEDAW. Yet, there are several reasons why women have hardly reached educational equality in the past. According to CHINA. ORG. CN which is China’s official gateway to news and information, “In feudal times, literacy was not valued in women and their major responsibility was caring for their husbands and families” (2001). This can be said for the other countries in Southeast/East Asia. In addition, women had to be submissive to their husbands or sons. As a result, for example, 90 percent of Chinese women were uneducated a half-century ago, and 88 percent of Malaysian women who are over the age of 70 are illiterate. That is, education for women was not a primary concern for their lives. However, the idea, which says that women should stay at home for the household’s sake, has been changing and the governments have actually noticed that women also need education for their society as they begin to understand the economic impact women have as well. Overall, there should be more schools, and then it would be easy to access education for everybody. There are the facts that show how much people have reached education and what the result of this education is.

According to CEDAW, Vietnam is the best performer in Southeast Asia-Pacific region in terms of Gender Development Index for economic development, reducing poverty and addressing social issues as well. Vietnam has created laws
and policies for asserting gender equality. CEDAW also reports that the literacy rate is 94% of the population and 92% for women, or the rate over 10 years is 92.13% for population and 89.31% for women in Vietnam that are really high. In addition, they have built primary schools in every village and hamlet, junior secondary schools in every commune and senior secondary schools in every district. They also have tried to remove gender bias which states that women are weaker and dependent, whereas; men are respectful and independent from textbooks.

There are still lots of illiterate people in China, the Women and Children Working Committee of the State Council reported that China has tried to eliminate those people; the 4 million illiterate people for each year for the past several years. Although 65% of these people are women, the adult woman illiteracy rate is decreasing. The age of 15 to 45 for the woman illiteracy rate is less than 8%. The Chinese government has tried to promote education for women as well, and they have become more active and as well have flourished at the scientific fields, ranging from microelectronics to satellite launching, and they have taken part in the country’s economic development and public administration. Moreover, some schools in China are more flexible for female children; half-day primary school, half-farming and half-studying primary schools, girls’ primary schools, they can bring their siblings, and the students can be late and leave early if necessary.

The literacy rate in Malaysia has been also quite high; the age of 10-30 is 96%, 30-40 is 86%, 40-50 is 68%, 50-60 is 43% and 60-70 is 25% according to
CEDAW. Malaysian women have also attended more schools gradually as their
governments provide financial aid, subsidized transportation, free book loans and
free uniforms for lower-income girls. In addition, women are encouraged to enter
polytechnic, and 61.2% of scholarships were given to women for it (1998).
Moreover, the dropout rate of females is lower than males; primary school is
0.57% and secondary school is only 2.77%. As more women have attended
university than men, they have been more educated. The Education Act of 1961
provides 28 primary schools and 3 secondary schools and services for disabled
children, and there are about even for both girls and boys that are enrolled.

The literacy rate between men and women over the age of 10 is almost
equal: 92.3% and 92.0% in the Philippines according to CEDAW (2000).
Because both men and women have almost the same educational opportunities,
or women have greater access to higher education than men, women have more
career choices, such as in agriculture, forestry, fishery and veterinary medicine
which were supposed to be the men’s occupations. In addition, mathematics and
computer science are interesting fields to learn for more women than men. The
educational department is showing some effort. For instance, the elementary
education bureau has included human rights and sex education into the
curriculum. Also, in the main medical universities in this country, topics relating to
GAD, and Violence Against Women (VAW) are also integrated into the medical
curriculum.

In Thailand, the National Education act of 1999 gives equal opportunity
education for free for 12 years. Moreover, monks get free education including
room and board, and women can be nuns. Although there are still little
differences in education between rural and urban areas, the amount of
secondary and higher education institution in rural areas has increased.

Although only men who were practicing the Buddhist religion could have
education in Laos, they have been changing the educational system there and
that means that there is an increase in schools and participation in education
according to the World Bank. According to UNESCO, the entire educational
system is ineffective for both male and female, but also the organization states
that females are subject to discrimination in the education system. Therefore,
they have demanded to reform the Laos education system, and then the risk of
dropping out of school for female can be prevented. In addition, this organization
has suggested implementing bilingual education to better reach those women
living in rural areas.

According to World Bank, Indonesia is also the great example of
improvement in the education programs. Although there is a big literacy rate
difference between men and women in the older generations, the education level
for people who are under 20 years old is almost the same. CEDAW also
recommended that all measures be taken to give women equal opportunities in
education. Recently, women are more educated, the educational system has
attained achievement, and illiterate women are decreasing, as a result; these
achievements lead to economic growth.

In Cambodia, the rate of females attending primary school is increasing,
and 2001 to 2002 school year female students’ rates increased in lower and
higher and secondary education. The government indicated 9 years of compulsory education. In addition, they have opened non-formal education with the support so NGOs for orphan children, street children, poor children and drug addicted children due to promoting them to return to formal education.

The facts and thoughts of education in Southeast/East Asia are positive overall. However, there are still some issues. Mainly, there is still traditional practice/the idea of patriarchy. This idea is that women, who have responsibilities for taking care of their children and families, and supposed to be docile to their men, are regarded in their no need of an education and if women could attend school and become pregnant, they have to give up education, but men. “Total net enrollment rates observed at the primary education level are high but fall drastically at the secondary level, with the rates of girls slightly behind at both levels. Women’s literacy rates are lower than men’s by more than five percentage points” (IWRAW, 2003). Moreover, their report has told that more Chinese rural women have gotten education, but there is a critical question, which is the governmental implementation that has allocated only minimal funding for them. Also, even if women could have education fortunately, the amount of salary is not equal to men. The other problem is that females from ethnic minority groups and disabled females are often marginalized in society, so they cannot have rights to have a good enough education. Also, even though many children have attended primary schools, some boys of them have to drop out from there as they have to help their family’s task or earn money instead of studying. Therefore, to reform these issues in education, both males and females
must equally have a well education.

CONCLUSION

While Southeast Asia is not the best at conforming to the CEDAW convention, it is hardly the worst. Cultural attitudes among the younger generation in these countries are changing. Girls having access to and receiving an education and literacy is an extremely important and top priority in all the Southeast Asian countries highlighted. This education will only improve the movements made towards female empowerment and gender equality. The laws and legislations are there and all the countries are under international pressure to enforce them. While much work needs to be done in equalizing women in this region, the seeds have been planted. With continued efforts to make women and girls aware of their rights under CEDAW, the future of Southeast Asia looks promising. Imagine how much will be accomplished when the girls of today become the women of tomorrow. But also imagine their male peers growing up with the knowledge and awareness of what a female is truly capable of doing and their acceptance of this. It is only the beginning!
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