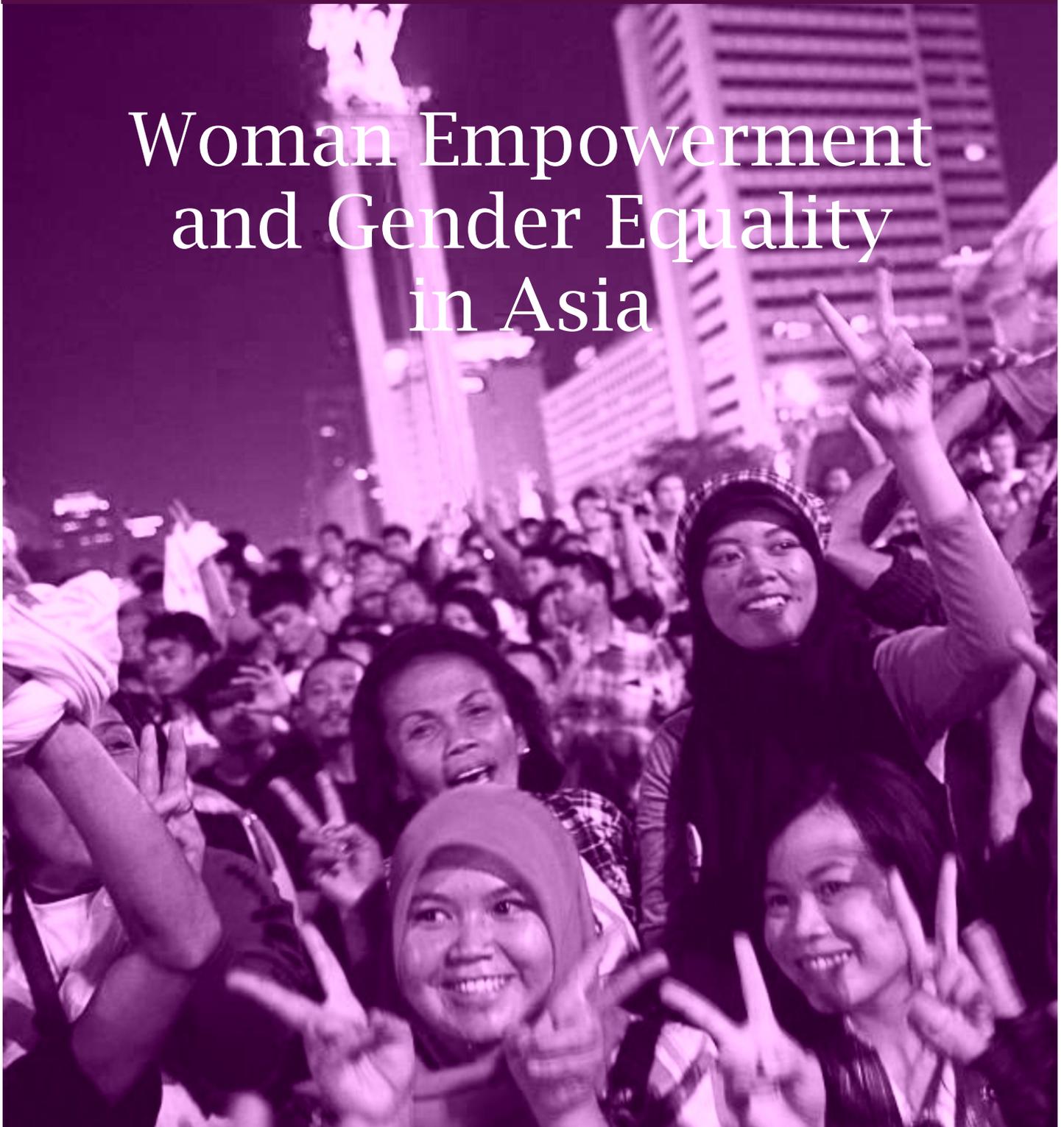


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Woman Empowerment and Gender Equality in Asia



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER IN ASIA

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Beginning in the French Revolution, more than two centuries ago, progressives have pro-actively pushed for greater participation by women in the public sphere. At the heart of the project of modernity, anchored by principles of Enlightenment, was the empowerment of human beings, regardless of gender, race, class or religion.

With women comprising about half (49.6 percent according to the World Bank) of the global population, and in some countries even more, there is no point in discussing democracy, human rights, and freedom without extending civil and political rights to both sexes. Overtime, same principle has been extended not only to the women, but minority genders, specifically the LGBT group, which has gained growing social recognition and legal protection in the past decades.

Yet, more than a century since the advent of First Wave feminism, which successfully advocated for expansion of the right of suffrage to the female population, structures of hierarchy are stubbornly pernicious. Gender bias and discrimination, especially in unofficial terms and in unwritten rules, continues to plague not only traditional, conservative societies, but also advanced democracies. More than two centuries since the founding of America, the world's oldest modern democracy, the world's superpower is yet to elect its first female president.

As Rafaela David, a youth activist in the Philippines, writes in this edition of *Quarterly*, "The female body, especially in many traditional societies in Asia, is a taboo topic." After all, women empowerment, David writes, is about "the recognition that much of the struggle

Gender bias and discrimination, especially in unofficial terms and in unwritten rules, continues to plague not only traditional, conservative societies, but also advanced democracies.

is not limited to improving women's political participation and access to welfare services, but improving women's social and cultural control over her body -- a cultural symbol whose devaluation has allowed poverty and inequality to persist through the years."

For many observers, misogynistic prejudice has been more than evident during the latest presidential elections -- pitting Hillary Clinton, the first female candidate by the two major political parties, against strongmen candidates like Donald Trump, who have unabashedly tapped into the darkest, illiberal instincts of sections of the electorate. In France, the oldest modern republic, no woman has ever won the presidency yet, though, some polls suggest that the proto-fascist National Front party, led by Marine Le Pen, might put an end to such political anomaly, but with potentially disturbing consequences for French democracy and beyond.

Outside the West, in wealthy democracies such as Japan, women are woefully underrepresented in both politics and the labor markets (49 percent). Globally, according to the World Bank, female labor force participation has actually declined over the past two decades, from 52.2 percent to less than 50 percent in recent years. It is highest among high-income countries (57 percent) and North America (57 percent), but lowest among low-income countries (39 percent) and Middle East and North Africa (22 percent), where robust structures of hierarchy have prevented the full utilization and nourishment of the vast potentials of the female population.

In South Asia, where major countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have ubiquitously voted women to the highest positions in power, the general female population, especially those at the lowest rung of the society, is still heavily underrepresented in the political system and labor market. Female literacy rates are extremely low in traditional democracies like India (65.46%, 2011 estimate). As far as female representation in the legislature is concerned, it seems levels of economic development isn't a key factor, but instead the overall political culture.

In Sub-Saharan African countries like Rwanda, female representation in the lower house is as high as 63.8 percent, far outstripping the male population. Similarly high numbers are also observed in poor countries like Bolivia (53 percent) and Cuba (48 percent), but also among Scandinavian countries like Sweden (43



Image: www.japantimes.co.jp

Outside the West, in wealthy democracies such as Japan, women are woefully underrepresented in both politics and the labor markets (49 percent).

percent) and Finland (41 percent). Levels of representation in the lower-house are, however, generally low among Asian countries, including the two biggest democracies, India (12 percent) and Indonesia (17.1 percent). Yet, various studies show that female representation

In the Gender Inequality Index (GII), developed by the United Nations and which measures gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development — reproductive health (e.g., infant mortality), empowerment (e.g., parliamentary representation), and economic status (e.g., labor force participation) — all top 10 countries are European, with heavy representation among Scandinavian countries.

But developing countries like the Philippines have performed well in other indices such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2014, where the South East Asian country ranked ninth in the world. Nicaragua and Rwanda were also among top 10 countries in the list. Gladly, as

Nepalese journalist Bharati Silawal-Giri writes in the *Quarterly*, “Today women’s empowerment and gender equality are an intrinsic element of all development interventions and internationally agreed goals.”

In places like Sweden, a Parliamentarian Lawen Redar writes, the government has gone so far as decriminalizing prostitution, while criminalizing its solicitation, thus “allowing women to seek help, economic security or social networking if she wants to leave her life as a prostitute.” Yet, violence against women and institutionalized discrimination is still a daily struggle for vast majority of women in the Philippines and other democratic countries.

Even though various studies show that greater women representation in the public sphere and labor markets contributes heavily to greater national productivity and democratic vigor, obstacles to female empowerment are still entrenched and stubborn.



Image: www.politico.eu

In the coming year, among the three most powerful Western democracies could very well be led by women.

In the coming year, among the three most powerful Western democracies could very well be led by women -- Germany (Merkel), United Kingdom (May), and Marine Le Pen (France) -- but the struggle for representation and greater female voice in public administration is far from over. So is the struggle to pave the way for greater female participation in the labor market and political institutions, especially in deeply patriarchal societies of Asia.

“There are costs to low women [political and economic] representation”, Syerleena Rashid, Councilor in Malaysian city of Penang writes in *the Quarterly*, since “women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure, health and peace-building.”

In places such as the Philippines, where female representation and gender equality is among the highest in the world, as feminist activist Shamah Bulangis observes in *the Quarterly*, “Many of the women in power come from political dynasties or have elite backgrounds. The political sphere is still co-opted by the same 'old boys club', with their wives rather serving as [temporary] place-holders than real wielders of power.”

In newly created nations such as Timor Leste, meanwhile, where there are progressive laws on gender equality, feminist activist Nurima Ribeiro Alkatiri observes, “strong patriarchal beliefs are entrenched within the Timorese society.”

The *Quarterly*, brining together insights from leading policy-makers, activists and academics from across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, aims assess the achievements of the feminist movement and corollary efforts at advocating gender equity in recent history, particularly in the context of Asia. The aim is to shed light on a series of policy proposals and advocacies to advance gender equality and women rights across the region beyond.



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IN CONTROL OF HER BODY:

Breaking the Cycle of Cultural and Social Reproduction
in Asia through the emancipation of the Female Body

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Women comprise the majority of the world's poor. This is especially true across developing countries in Asia where more women comprise the informal labor sector and engage in traditionally unpaid household work. The gender gap in wages further parallel the gap between men and women's access to health and welfare services, as well as their corresponding access to political and cultural power.

With the wide recognition of the feminization of poverty --- that is the disparate proportion of women caught up in the cycle of poverty --- many international organizations and Asian governments, have tried (though many still fail) to put at the center of their development policy, the welfare of the woman.

These efforts includes mainstreaming of gender and development (GAD) in

various levels of governance, and inclusion of women's access to services as part of various government's poverty eradication programs. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) also includes gender equality and the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women.

For progressives and leftist in Asia, the important next step to such gender mainstreaming in development policy, is the necessary project of recognizing, attacking head on and effectively disrupting (if not completely transforming) *the social and cultural structures that reproduce intergenerational and intersex inequalities, especially those that manifest themselves inside the household.*

Two points come to mind: (1) the subjugation of women and economic

devaluation of traditionally female reproductive work within the household serves as one of the pillars of social reproduction and must therefore be maintained, (2) the house is the first arena where a child gets enculturated and educated especially among Asian communities, and therefore serves as a crucial site for cultural reproduction of a highly patriarchal nature, which in turn also allows for social reproduction of highly unequal societies.

The interrelationship of poverty and female oppression within the household is therefore hard to miss. One feeds into the other. The task at hand is to understand this process of social and cultural reproduction within the household, and identify points of intervention to transform social relationship and fight inequality.

The female body - the corporeal site for social reproduction

A possible entry point towards understanding how social and cultural reproduction works and further perpetuates the feminization of poverty is the *female body*.

The female body, especially in many traditional societies in Asia, is a taboo topic. The female body which bleeds every month, a messy affair that must be tidied and hidden from view.

And yet the female body is political. It is and has been a site for contestation --- from the socially accepted notions of beauty to the cultural norms that govern female sexuality.

The persisting structures that define how the female body must be treated, may very well provide a deeper understanding of how social reproduction works, and how it can be combated within the household, and in the wider Asian context. Violence against a woman's body, its cycles and manifestations, can provide much insight on the day to day manifestation of how a large portion of society are continually pulled down in the cycle of poverty.

The centrality of the female body in understanding the perpetuation of poverty and inequality can be underscored on two fronts, on the one hand, in terms of its economic costs and on the other in terms of its cultural implications.

On the one hand, the cost of violence against women also reach alarming proportions, reaching an average of 3.7 percent of GDP.

The statistics bare further the human costs of gender-based violence: One out of three women worldwide would experience sexual or physical violence, most of which from an intimate partner. In the developing countries of Asia, the figure is estimated to be double, with as high as 55 percent of Asian women experiencing sexual or physical abuse. Globally, one out of two women murdered were killed by their partner or family.



The female body, especially in many traditional societies in Asia, is a taboo topic.

Both UN Women and the World Health Organization describe such rampant violence against women as a pandemic of global proportions.

On the other hand, the sociological and cultural impacts remain largely understated, especially as these costs are considered norms in many Asian societies. The female body, as it is used and abused, are dictated and re-dictated not just by fathers but by mothers to their daughters.

This is most evident in the prescribed clothing of the female body, the dispensation of the female body in the form of child brides to reduce the number of mouths to be fed, the unplanned pregnancies that many young girls face for the sake of the preservations of chastity.

Life-long struggle for survival

Indeed, across Asia, and even many parts of Africa and the Middle East, women's control over her body remains limited to

absent. This is evident, especially when looking at the various stages of a woman's life.

As early as infancy, a girl's body is not considered her own. The United Nations Population Fund estimated that at present, there are 117 million 'missing' infant girls across Asia due to gender-biased sex selection or infanticide. In China and India alone, two of the largest countries worldwide, over a million baby girls are either aborted or killed as newborns every year, equivalent to over 3,000 dead baby girls every day. This alarming number shows the stark discrimination against women and the lower status given to them in various societies across Asia.

For a daughter who is allowed to live, the possibility of female genitalia mutilation is also high. Worldwide, 200 million women would have had female genitalia mutilation when they are only a few days or few years old. Such practice is most prevalent in Africa, Middle East and Asia.

In Indonesia, 85.2 percent of girls would have been circumcised before they reach ten years old (97.5 when they reach 15-18 years old). Similar data can be seen in various communities across Malaysia and Southern Philippines.

In South Asian countries, especially in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Afghanistan, a girl in her early teens, would be a perfect candidate for marriage. In this region, one out of two women is expected to be married before the age of 18. An estimated 700 million women alive today have been married before they reach legal age. Of these child marriages, a whopping 67% is from Asia (32% alone in India). Such data is alarming, especially as some studies indicate that girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence than women who marry later in their lives.

Such practice in South Asia is further driven by the dowry system whereby the woman's family would give a dowry to the groom upon marriage. The younger the daughter is, the lesser the dowry. The daughter is therefore seen as a cost-burden and must be given away as early as possible. On the other hand, the son is preferable as he will be bringing wealth to the family upon marriage.

Such arrangements further lead to what has been coined as dowry-deaths where a bride is driven to commit suicide, or is killed, sometimes through bride burning, as a result of her inability to pay additional dowry. In India alone, it is estimated that at least one dowry death occurs per hour.

For many young women, deciding when and how many children they will bear remain largely out of their hands.

The UNFPA estimates that globally, a total of 7.3 million births a year to teen mothers, majority of which come from developing countries in Asia and Africa. Albeit global trends show teenage pregnancy on a decline, teenage pregnancy therefore remains an alarming concern for women especially in Asia.

It is also worthy to note that maternal mortality rate has dramatically dropped

compared to the 1990 levels, but they remain to be of high concern in developing countries where 99% of maternal deaths occur. A mother in South Asia would have the highest risk of death at child birth at 182 for every 100,000, highest in the world except in Sub Saharan Africa.

Many Asian women have also been driven towards prostitution and various forms of modern slavery due to poor working conditions. The rapid increase in prostitution and sex tourism has further made prostitution a highly lucrative industry, especially in Southeast Asia. Others become victims to human trafficking. According to the Global Slavery Index of 2016, two-thirds of the total 45.8 million people trafficked worldwide came from Asia and the Pacific.

Some initial lessons

Looking through the cycles of oppression to which the female body is subjected to, there is glaring trend that is worth a

closer look: Violence against women and the female body has an evident connection with the cultural norms and social inequalities present in the community and households.

These conditions of social inequality and cultural norms have further been transmitted within the household and communities, across generations, and at times, by the abused women themselves.

Take for example the case of sex-selective abortions: the economic and cultural premium on men allow for mothers, who most likely have been subjected to other forms of gender-based oppression, is now forced to let go of their baby girls. The prevalent practice of female genitalia mutilation among babies in some countries is also traditionally conducted by women, as a sign of modesty and to ensure social inclusion of the woman child into the community. Child marriages, a practice that is both encouraged as a business transaction, also serves as an affirmation of the society's lower premium given to women.

In South Asian countries, especially in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Afghanistan, a girl in her early teens, would be a perfect candidate for marriage.

Image: www.rte.ie



It is therefore evident that women oppression requires so much more than women empowerment and a gendered development policy, but a comprehensive analysis and program to address the mechanisms that allow for such transmission of norms, values, and the eventual reproduction of social relations, especially with respect to the body.

This includes the recognition that much of the struggle is not limited to **improving women's political participation and access to welfare services, but improving women's social and cultural control over her body --- a cultural symbol whose devaluation has allowed poverty and inequality to persist through the years.**

Taking control of her body

In the face of a multitude of challenges to end violence against women, there have been various efforts to promote women's rights especially with respect to their social, economic and cultural empowerment.

In the international level, UN Women launched the "UNiTE Campaign Orange Day Action Plan" last 25 October 2016 to streamline a gendered perspective to all the SDGs. Various governments in Asia has also promoted reproductive health legislation, however implementation of these legislations remain to be challenged. Child marriages and female genitalia mutilation has been banned in South Asian countries, albeit local informal institutions still prevail over such state regulations. The women's movement across Asia, has been pronounced in battling violence against women and promoting women's rights - from the Save the girl campaign in India to the Reproductive Health Advocates network in the Philippines.

Apart from these efforts however, below are some key suggestions on advocacy directions that socialists and progressives alike might want to pursue, in the effort of disrupting social and cultural reproductions:

Question Norms. The strength of the structures that promote women oppression and devaluation of the female body, is that they are considered in selected communities as normal. Hegemonic structures must be called out and intersection points of social inequality and poverty and enculturation must be targeted.

Educate about the female body. A norm that must be broken is the aversion of society to talk about the female body. Many reproductive health advocates have also been pushing forward age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health rights education. But education must always be reviewed --- do such educational programs and systems designed to reaffirm the standards set by society on women or to emancipate them from the biases that society imposes on them?

Tackle intergenerational women oppression. Women must be primary agents in reclaiming their control over bodies and in their lives. This is especially important as women within the family have historically been agents of oppression themselves, transmitting to the junior women in the family, the norms that their elder female family members have imposed on them. Programs must therefore allow both healing of women who have undergone gender-based violence and empower them to break the chain of women repression in the households.

Counter hegemonic institutions. Educational institutions, the church, and the media are but a few institutions that have promoted, or in some cases countered, stereotypes against the female body. It is crucial therefore to counter or coopt such institutions, in the project of emancipating the female body from unfair, unjust and inhumane expectations put upon her.

Value reproductive work. A crucial step for women's emancipation requires not only to remove the wage gap, but to promote reproductive work as equally important to productive work. The socialist struggle against capitalism happens not only in the workplace but even at home.

A messy affair

The various struggles to gain control over her body as experienced by women across Asia, is simply put, a struggle for social change.

Indeed, millions of Asian women remain unable to get humane treatment and access to their basic human rights. The female body is subjected to various kinds of abuse, and women are disempowered to make decisions for their own bodies and in their households. **But it is crucial to understand that such inhumane treatment of women is part and parcel of the social order reproducing itself. Social stratification and poverty thrives on the backs of women.**

Thus even though we have for instance achieved great strides in the recognition of reproductive health rights across different Asian nations, implementation will continue to be challenged by largely patriarchal institutions if we do not break the social inequalities and cultural norms that perpetuates gender violence.

It is therefore, the task of many progressives, both inside and outside of government to aim not only gender equality in its development and anti-poverty work, but the disruption and transformation of structures that reinforce our traditional biases and values. With the disproportionate levels of violence that women are subjected to, the gender question must necessarily be asked not only in our policy-making but also in the various levels of social and cultural relations.

Progressives and socialists, if they are to succeed in addressing inequality, must necessarily aim to revel in the need to disrupt society and show the messy and beautiful affair of the female body.

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EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: An Indian Perspective

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The status of women in Indian traditions and culture is anomalous. Women occupy a similar or even higher position than males in Indian dominant religious practices. They are worshiped as Goddesses of wealth, knowledge, power, and so on often with their husband-Gods or independently. There is a powerful proverb in Indian Vedic literature that says, "*Janani Janmabhūmicha Swargadapi gariyasi*" (the mother and the motherland are greater than heaven). Further, an ancient Sanskrit saying goes, "Woman is the home and the home is the basis of a society. So, as we build our homes we can build our country".

But, sadly, in reality, on the ground, such respect for women is hardly reflected. On the contrary, the oppression of women, violence against them such as rape, physical assault etc. are common place.

According to the latest data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), an agency of Government of India that keeps track of crimes in the country, there were 2.24 million crimes against women reported over the past decade, 26 crimes against women are reported every hour, or one complaint every 2 minutes¹⁷. There are various other sources for such data, from any account – government or private – the rate of crime is alarming. Therefore, the spiritual-cultural and actual status of women in India represents a paradox, calling for a deeper investigation into the dichotomy, and suggestions for amelioration of conditions of women.

As we assess the state of women empowerment in India, we need to bear in mind another peculiarity in Indian culture vis-à-vis women. Given the enormous diversity in Indian culture,

there is no uniformity in status of women. **Amongst the tribal people, who constitute nearly 9 per cent of Indian population that is over 120 million; women are liberated and work at par with the men or even more. Women of Scheduled Castes who are known as dalits (oppressed), women enjoy more freedom, as they have greater mobility than their counterparts in higher castes as they have to work for their living.** The women in the higher castes who are most restricted have considerable say in decision-making as the proxy of their husbands. So, generally, women in their own homes are protected and safe, enjoying freedom of choice, thought and action. Many of them receive education and are active in various fields. India's late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the only woman head of the government so far, characterised women in a much balanced way: "Indian women are traditionally conservative, but they also have the genius of synthesis to adapt and absorb. That is what gives them resilience to face suffering and to meet upheavals with a degree of calm, to change constantly, and yet remain changeless which is the quality of India itself." It may sound a bit euphoric as it comes from a woman politician, but there is a large grain of truth in it. The problem occurs when women confront their perpetrators from across their families, castes and community. The same status that they enjoy in their own habitat becomes a target for attack and violence outside from dominant, antagonistic and belligerent upper castes. For instance, as they are supposed to be carriers of culture and civilization, their 'honour' is attacked and they are raped. Thus, rape in India is often a violation of women's honour rather than for sexual gratification.

Against this backdrop of some Indian specificity on the status of women, it is in order that one examines the government policies and social practices that influence women empowerment process. Social practices that impair the freedom and security of women include *sati*, *purdah*, child marriage, enforced widowhood and dowry etc. All these customs are outlawed by successive Indian governments.

Yet, they persist in camouflage. It must be noted that, whatever may have been the rationale for the existence of such practices, they were seriously anti-women, undermining their rights, dignity and safety as human beings. *Sati* is a practice that calls upon the woman to sacrifice herself in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Practice of *purdah* is noticed mainly among the Muslim communities and some lower caste Hindu women. The women cover their faces fully in order not to attract the lust of the men. Child marriage is another practice that denies women the right to choose their life partners. In some Hindu castes, widow marriage is prohibited, the women who lose their husbands even at an early age are considered bad omen, are forced to remain as widows, and in a social quarantine even in their own families. **Finally, the dowry is a vicious social practice that affects the women and their families in multiple ways.** A dowry is demanded by the groom in a marriage irrespective of the ability of bride's family to pay. Thus, women find it difficult to marry, and in order to save their families from social embarrassment and harassment by the bridegroom's family, they either

commit suicide or are often tortured by the groom's family. Many women's activist groups have been fighting against these practices that covertly persist in rural areas of India.

On the upside of the Indian culture that help women's cause, there are social-territorial women groups who are as good as or even better than men. **Traditionally, the tribal women live in a liberated social milieu as they have to work in the fields and forests to eke out their living.** Also, they live in communities, not in social isolation like other Hindu caste women. So they have to mix and mingle with others. In the North-East of India comprising 8 provincial States, the women belong to tribal groups and Christian faith, both of which are communitarian in nature putting greater emphasis on education and socialisation. Women in these states, therefore, enjoy greater freedom and mobility. Given the huge diversity of India, such culture-differentials need to be noted as India is viewed erroneously as a Hindu-majority State and the caste contradictions in Northern India and portrayed as pan-Indian practice.

Rape in India is often a violation of women's honour rather than for sexual gratification.

Image: tribune.com.pk





Image: www.sbs.com.au

A dowry is demanded by the groom in a marriage irrespective of the ability of bride's family to pay.

We would like to cite a success story on women's empowerment that exemplifies the possibility of women climbing up the social-political ladder with appropriate hand-holding and escorting. A caveat on Indian democracy where women participate and acquire political positions and social recognition may not be out of place. Despite the existence of sizeable illiteracy and widespread poverty, Indian democracy is vibrant, attracting participation by all sections of society. Political awareness and enthusiasm is usually high in India for a developing country. The case we illustrate is that of a landless, semi-literate, 46 years old gypsy woman named Nisha, in a village, 90 kilometres away from Delhi. The village was without electricity and any assets like land for cultivation, or house, except some goats. The villagers earned their living by doing seasonal daily-wage work. Schumacher Centre, a development

them in political sensitisation on their rights and entitlements under 73rd Constitutional Amendment. According to this Amendment, village *panchayats* (Councils) are to have regular elections, and to assume greater role in local development by accessing directly from the central government: funds, functions, and functionaries. More important, women were to have one-third of Council seats reserved for them as a matter of affirmative action in favour of women to raise their share in decision making. Subsequently, some States have raised it to 50 per cent. This is so because the subject of local self government comes under federal law. However, the Minister in-charge, Government of India has stated that, "though some States have provided 50 per cent reservation to women in *panchayats*, the government will, through Constitutional Amendment, ensure that it is implemented in the whole country".

The Schumacher Centre worked on Nisha on the need and scope of leadership in the village council to make things happen in the interest of the villagers. She was taught the basic elements of social mobilisation, leadership traits, and how to prepare and implement small development projects in the village council. Nisha rose from the grassroots level to be a village Sarpanch (Chief of the Council) and has been re-elected twice. There are several such stories as there are 3 million village council members in 600,000 villages of India, and about half is women. This is one government policy that facilitates women participation and empowerment through their involvement in local self-governance and village development. And this is by far the best pro-women empowerment legislation inasmuch as it promotes political as well

as social and economic progress of women. In the Indian Constitution, there is a whole gamut of provisions for gender equality. But, curiously, as Indian spirituality does not reflect on social practice, a progressive Constitution in India is bedevilled by archaic, tradition-bound, rigid social structures. Take for instance, the Preamble of the Constitution ensures “justice - social, economic, and political; equality of status and opportunity; and dignity to all”. Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Constitution include Article 14 – right to equality; Article 15(1) – prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex; Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment and appointment to any office. In addition, there are Directive Principles of State Policy, in the Constitution, which, though not enforceable in a court of law provide for gender equality: Article 39(a) – “equality of right to an adequate means of livelihood”; Article 39(d) – “equal pay for equal work for both men and women”; Article 42 – just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief”. Finally, the Fundamental Duties enshrined in the Constitution enjoin the responsibility of maintaining equality on all citizens. In Articles 50(A) & (C), “expects citizens to promote harmony and spirit of common brotherhood, and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.”

As stated above, such pro-women constitutional principles did not help the conditions of women under anti-women social structures, so the Parliament of India came up with a host of laws in favour of women. Notable among them are the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956; the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971; Equal remuneration Act 1976; the Commission of Sati (prevention) Act 1987; the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006; the Sexual Harassment of Women at work place Act 2013. Furthermore, the Parliament has adopted several policies and schemes for women empowerment with a Ministerial Department called “Women and Child Development” dedicated to implementing them. In 2001, a National Policy for Empowerment of Women was unveiled.

Under this policy, for economic empowerment, there are government schemes like *swashakti* (self-empowerment), *swayam siddha* (self-doing), STEP (Support to Training and Empowerment Programme), *swavlamban* (self-reliance). Women receive various trainings and financial support through these schemes. Governments also support working women's hostels, crèches for the children of working women. And for protection and rehabilitation of women in difficult circumstances – there are schemes like *swadhan* (money-in-hand), and short stay homes. To top it all, there are Commissions for women, one at the Centre called National Commission for Women and in each of the 29 States, called State Commission for Women. These Commissions are 'quangos' (quasi-non-governmental organisations) meant to protect women and secure them justice in case of harassment by government officials or agencies.

To conclude, women in India are revered in its spiritual-religious practices, protected and provided for in the Constitution, laws, and schemes, yet, the harassment, torture and exploitation of women persist day in and day out. Obviously, there is still a long distance to cover on the 'decent work' for women backed by adequate education of women and sensitisation of men. **In particular, the Indian hierarchical social**

structures based on caste (an Indian peculiarity) and on patriarchy (a universal trend) have to be demolished by progressive thinkers and actors. Therefore, gender justice should remain one of the main planks of progressives in India.

¹ <http://ncrb.nic.in> / Also see <http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/crimes-against-women-reported-every-two-minutes-84240>

² Indira Gandhi, “True Liberation of Women”, Speech at the inauguration of the All-India Women's Conference, 26 March 1980 <http://gos.sbc.edu/g/gandhi1.html>

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DEVELOPMENT IS MORE THAN JUST ECONOMIC GROWTH:

Why Closing the Gender Gap Needs to Be on Everyone's Agenda?

Bhaarati Silawal-Giri

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Background

The evolution of the feminist movements from the First Wave starting with Seneca Falls Convention in the USA in 1848 to the Fourth Wave or New Age Feminism of the 21st Century has influenced development approaches to a large extent. These development approaches have been criticized for ignoring the gender roles and relationships and their impact on women especially in the global South. Since the initiation of development programs in the 50s, attempts have been made to integrate women into development programs with the objective of eradicating poverty and uplifting the standards of the people in developing countries. The main theoretical approaches have evolved from women in development (WID), women and development (WAD) to gender and development (GAD).

WID, which was introduced in the 70s focused on women's productive role as producers and workers and failed to make the link with their reproductive role thus adding on to their workload. By viewing women as a separate category in development they remained on the margins of mainstream development as an 'add-on'.

In response to this, WAD was taken up in the late 70s, acknowledging women as critical payers in development and their contributions both within the house and outside. However, while women were able to adapt to their changing roles, the men still behaved according to the traditional concept as the patriarch of the house expecting women to fulfill their primary responsibilities of taking care of household chores before taking on work outside of the home leading to conflicts within the households. GAD, therefore,

was introduced in the late 1980s as an alternative keeping in mind the triple roles of women by undertaking a gender analysis of the social structures and social and gender relations to expose discrimination, injustice and inequality. Based on such analyses, it focuses on laws and policies for redressing economic, social, political and structural anomalies between men and women for achieving the goal of gender equality. Black Feminist and Third World Feminist critiques are appreciated for their meaningful insights especially in the paradigm shift from WID to GAD and providing GAD frameworks in development practice.²

Concurrently, locating the agenda of the advancement of women and gender equality at the center stage, has also been the outcome of a focused international attention that has developed on the principles of equality, development and

peace since the first World Conference on Women that was held in Mexico City in 1975. The journey has not been without pitfalls and struggles either, with changing economic and political scenarios the world over. Every successive Conference on Women has emphasized the universality, indivisibility, and the inalienable rights of women and their unconditional participation in decision-making and economic empowerment as being critical to sustainable human development.

It was at the UN Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995 that a comprehensive set of commitments towards women's equality ever made by Governments, with a vast array of recommendations on the identified 12 Critical Areas of Concern contained in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). The BPfA constitutes a global agenda for women's human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women. Here, a fundamental shift from focus on women to the concept of gender took place, which was instrumental in sparking a renewed global commitment to the empowerment of women with the adoption of gender mainstreaming as a strategy to achieve the goal of gender equality. Since the Beijing Conference governments have increasingly adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy to overcome gender gaps and this can be rightly pointed out as a major achievement. The implementation of this strategy through gender analysis, collection and generation of sex and gender disaggregated data has informed policies, programming and budget allocations and galvanized both state and non-state actions to work toward achieving gender equality results.

Another important milestone has been the ratification of the Convention on Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), by increasing number of signatory States. It is one of the most powerful instruments for women's equality that encompasses the political and civil rights as well as the social and economic rights of women. It defines discrimination against not just as a legal distinction between women and men



Image: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk

Today women's empowerment and gender equality are an intrinsic element of all development interventions and internationally agreed goals.

about as any form of treatment that has the effect or purpose of discrimination leading to denial of choice. **For this reason it is not just concerned with equality in opportunity and access for which substantive measures are required but also in equality of results or benefits.** Both these documents together with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) address the women's rights to economic empowerment and call on States to protect and promote women's rights in the private and public spheres across all sectors.

These developments on the international front have had important implications on aid and development in developing countries. They have served to highlight the gender-neutrality of development programs/projects including budget allocations for linking organizational effectiveness with gender-responsive development outcomes and measuring progress on

gender equality. Today women's empowerment and gender equality are an intrinsic element of all development interventions and internationally agreed goals.

Gender Equality and Development:

Building on the unfinished agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) UN member states have agreed to a new set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs set out 169 targets to address poverty, hunger, quality education, gender equality, good health and well-being, decent work, sustainable cities and communities, climate change, peace and justice including partnerships.

The MDGs (2000 – 2015) propelled action for reducing child and maternal mortality. The diminishing of gender gap in education is witnessing more girls having access to primary education. Nevertheless, challenges remain in the areas of:

- Structural discrimination against women and their cultural devaluation owing to the universal social system of patriarchy;
- Limited access to basic services, health care, education owing to weak public sector financial management;
- Access to land, credit, information, markets, and training opportunities;
- Armed conflict and its disproportionate impact on women and girls which makes them more vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence, HIV/AIDs and disabilities;
- Deteriorating health and food insecurity as a result of low productivity of land emanating from climate change and consequences of natural disasters;
- Unsafe migration and trafficking of girls and women for sex-work and the nexus with HIV/AIDs;
- Discrimination and violence against women and girls that continue to rise and with impunity;
- Under-representation of women in political and economic decision-making process.

While economic growth has a direct relation to poverty reduction, it does not automatically reduce gender inequality as the intersectionalities of gender, class and race oppression particular the vectors of oppression and privilege that shape the social, cultural, economic and political conditions of individuals and social groups remain unaddressed. Nevertheless, economic empowerment of women is one of the strategic means to empowerment as it helps women to walk out of abusive relationships. The terms “empowerment” and “development” are being increasingly used synonymously and even interchangeably as if to mean that development in terms of economic growth per se will by itself empower the target beneficiaries especially the women and that too poor women. The definition of term, “empowerment”, is understood as having four basic components²:

- ▶ **Women's sense of internal strength and confidence to face life**
- ▶ **The right to determine choices**
- ▶ **The power to control their own lives within and outside the home**
- ▶ **The ability to influence the direction of social change towards the creation of a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally.**

If this definition is to be translated into practice then the term, “empowerment”, itself demands a closer scrutiny. The term empowerment embodies within it the concept of power. Who controls, dominates, decides and has access to resources? In every society power is dynamic and relational operating within an ideology and structure to justify and perpetuate the existing patterns of control and distribution of resources, thus making one group of people more powerful and the other less powerful.

Nevertheless, the survival of the powerful depends on the acquiescence of the powerless, which is mediated by values, rules, procedures and beliefs that seem to be non-negotiable. This may be initially achieved through coercive means or threat of coercion, but soon the ideologues of the dominant group take over and are reinforced through social, economic, legal political and religious institutions and structures. For example, son preference over the girl is sanctioned by the religious Hindu text, *Garud Puran*, which is chanted on the occasion of the bereavement of a family member. It dictates, 'A family without any issue, and most specifically without a son, shall go to hell.' Surely nobody in their right mind would want to go to hell and, therefore, women's *raison de etre* for living is in producing a son and thus acting as insurance for a berth in heaven. It is essentially this seemingly non-negotiable aspect that has perpetuated the unequal gender relations between men and women and groups of men and women by maintaining men's overall control over resources whether it is in the private or the public sphere.

Nevertheless, economic empowerment of women is one of the strategic means to empowerment as it helps women to walk out of abusive relationships.

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While the MDG 3 on gender equality focused solely on equality in education, wage labor, and participation in government, the SDG 5 includes nine specific targets that address major barriers to gender equality and female empowerment. Of special note are two targets that address: (i) all forms of violence including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation; and, (ii) harmful cultural practices that devalue girls and women.

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, a constitutive element of patriarchy that both reflects and reinforces subordination and gender discrimination. It not only dehumanizes the perpetrators but also impacts negatively on the health - both emotional and physical; security; and, self-esteem of the victims/survivors. At the same time it imposes a tremendous economic cost to the countries in the form of absenteeism from productive work, increased health care expenditures and taxing public services – police, courts and social welfare. Although women experience violence across classes, races and cultures, some groups of women are especially vulnerable. These include women belonging to minority groups, indigenous women, refugee women, migrant women, women living in remote or isolated communities, women in institutions or in detention, women in situations of armed conflict women with disabilities, girl children, elderly women and destitute women.

Often times violence is a common theme in politics where the dictum “might is right” holds sway. Especially violence against women can act as a powerful disincentive, which deters them from entering politics as an off-limit zone. The difficulty of women to become public figures and leaders arises from an essentialist culture in which women have been assigned the primary tasks, roles and responsibilities of the private sphere- the home – which has been a historical journey of universal subjugation, suppression and oppression. Even though

Although women experience violence across classes, races and cultures, some groups of women are especially vulnerable.

women's participation in the labor market has increased, women are still excluded from opportunities to participate in public life owing to increasing workloads and gender biases in structures and processes.

Participation of women in politics have positive impacts on political process: (a) women parliamentarians bring in new perspectives and legislative priorities to the political debate; (b) they are more likely to introduce bills related to women's rights and to support laws that benefit women, children and families; and (c) studies have shown a positive correlation between women's participation in public life and reduction in corruption. While it is true that corruption affects all sectors of society, there are ways in which it particularly affects women as it siphons off the much-needed resources for delivery of services to the needy women.

Increasing women's participation in decision-making requires not only increasing numerical strength of women in public life and public administration through affirmative actions but also in substance by building their capacity to perform competently. At the same time, such positive measures also require changes in discriminatory policies and practices that perpetuate the low status of women. This also needs to be complemented by a focus on enhancing the accountability of state apparatus towards gender equality in line with international commitments and standards as erosion of transparency and accountability further perpetuates discriminatory attitudes and practices against women.

The achievement of SDG 5 targets is critical for making progress in all other 16 SDGs. Gender equality, as a crosscutting issue requires a multi-sectoral approach by adopting the rights-based framework. This demands not only

the recognition but also the creation of linkages between production and reproduction. At the moment there is an artificial separation, which has kept the economy divided between the formal and informal sectors and the definition of what constitutes economic activity and non-economic activity. This has left countless of women employed in home-based work doing piece rate and domestic work invisible. As a result they are unregistered workers without any legislative protection or social entitlement.

Social protection policies are gaining currency in the current context of increased poverty and inequality. Social protection floors in the form of access to essential health care, nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services, basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability, as well as basic income security for older persons are now being accepted as an essential component of sustainable human development. Consequently, they are increasingly being perceived as tangible social policy instruments that can achieve social and economic outcomes, inter alia through income redistribution mechanisms and transfers and behavioral incentives that facilitate labor market adjustments⁴.

Macroeconomic policies must and can promote women's empowerment and gender equality by providing economic opportunities to those who have been left out of development processes and benefits. **Engendering macro-economic policies that do not take into account the unpaid work of women in the “care economy” is key for addressing women's human and time poverty.** This unremunerated work is currently expended to provide

care at home, to fill in infrastructural deficiencies, especially in the area of public service delivery among other things. Hence poverty reduction strategies that acknowledge the link between reproduction and production, by not just integrating it in the reproductive and social sector – health, nutrition and population and education - not only promote equity but in many instances improve country efficiency as well as alleviate poverty.

Such linkages are essential for overcoming sectoral “employment-deficits”, especially in public service delivery. Long term caring for the sick in hospitals or at home, cooking and serving lunches for children's school programs, carrying water and collecting fuel are but some examples that exemplify this issue. Creating employment in these areas not only generates income for families and for women themselves in particular, but will also alleviate the extra time burden and drudgery some of these tasks place on women and children. Freed up time is much needed in ensuring completion rates of girls and boys in primary education, time for women to participate in community meetings, attend medical appointments for themselves and their children etc.

Given this reality, gender-responsive budgeting initiatives (GRBI) have become an internationally acknowledged tool for achieving gender equality. Pioneered in Australia during the 80s, today more than 90 countries have adopted GRBI to narrow the gender deficit in education, health and sustainable livelihoods and make the connections between poverty, women's empowerment and gender equality. Their main purpose is to analyse how government's budget allocations and expenditures are promoting gender equality as per the country's expressed commitment to international declarations and Conventions. In this manner, gender-sensitive budgets promote equitable allocations through various sources (revenues, loans, aid) and do not advocate for separate budgets for women.

While working with UNDP in Nepal, I initiated the GRBI in collaboration with

UN Women Nepal (erstwhile UNIFEM) under the leadership of Ministry of Finance (MoF) in the sectors of Health, Education and Agriculture. This process has now been institutionalized with the establishment of a Gender Responsive Budget Committee at the MoF in 2005. As a result, the government's directly GRB allocation has increased to 21.75% in 2013/14 from 11.30% in 2007/08. GRB system was also introduced in the Budget reform, which entailed strengthening the Public Finance Management System, establishing a Medium Term Expenditure Framework and Budgetary Framework for moving towards performance-based budgeting. GRBIs have become a powerful tool in enhancing development effectiveness, transparency, accountability and good governance as it adopts the participatory approach through consultations with stakeholders on public investments and expenditures.

This practice is now being extended to environmental planning and management for promoting the concept of Safe Cities for women to not only engage in economic activities but also to pursue the development of their capabilities through education and training. It examines economic relations between women and men, how economic relations affect gender relations in households, communities, markets, states and civil society and/or in projects, programs, sectoral and macro policies; and highlights the key differences between incentives and constraints under which men and women work⁵. Another tool for promoting safe cities for women is the application of Safety Audits are also applied to determine the forms of violence and/or harassment faced by women in public spaces; understand the factors which contribute to creating greater safety and inclusion for women; assess the responses (infrastructure and equipment, transport and service provision and capacity building) both by the women themselves and the police to harassment and lack of safety; and understand women's access to the police and their perception of the role of police in safeguarding women's security and rights.

Women and the Economy – Feminisation of Labour

Women's participation in economic activities goes a long way since the first wave of feminism and the movement for the right to suffrage. Since then the world has seen major developments on advancement of women but there is yet a long way to go to achieve equal and inclusive participation of women in economic growth and decision-making at par with men.

Today there has been a substantial increase of women in paid work. The majority of women are concentrated in the informal sector or engaged in home-based work, subsistence agriculture etc., which is not protected by legislation and difficult to measure especially in regions where culture denies them the right to work from outside of the home. The trend in the feminization of labor is witnessing a shift in employment from manufacturing to services in developed countries, and from agriculture to manufacturing and services in developing countries. With the increasing feminization of labor there is also increase in the feminization poverty as women's share of earned income is lower than men's (60-70 percent of men's wage)⁶.

The Progress of the World's Women 2015 – 2016 which focuses on women and the economy notes that the narrowing of gender gaps in labor force participation from 28 to 26 percentage points at the global level is attributed to faster declining rates of men's participation. Likewise, the narrowing of gender pay gap over the past decade in most countries cannot be taken as a sign of progress as the gaps have narrowed only because men's wages have fallen more dramatically than women's. Globally, on average, women's earnings are 24 per cent less than men's, and even in countries such as Germany—where policies are increasingly supportive of female employment—women on average earn just half as much income as men over their lifetimes⁷. Yet in all regions women work more than men: on average they do almost two and a half times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men,

and if paid and unpaid work are combined, women in almost all countries work longer hours than men each day⁸.

While globalization has opened up new opportunities for women to enter the labor market it has also led to the further replication of the gendered roles of women and widening the structural and gender inequalities. The trade off between unpaid reproductive activities and paid employment has not always been profitable to women. They often enter at the lowest level of the salary scale, occupy precarious and seasonal jobs with less and less employment benefits. Care services shift to younger women girls reducing their chances of attending schools and colleges. This perpetuates the cycle of feminized poverty across generations rather than reduce the burden of domestic services to allow greater participation of women in the formal economies. The recent trend towards privatization of basic services has its own challenges. Most poor families cannot afford the cost of privatized water and energy services. The burden of care, especially in the case of HIV/AIDs affected countries, continues to shift towards women and girls. Those who cannot afford to pay for childcare and domestic services offer their labor to those who can afford it and the cycle continues to marginalize poor women and girls. Furthermore, household workload acts as a barrier in taking up gainful employment outside of the home and limits women's choice of work. If at all women dare to venture outside their household they have to pay the "reproductive tax" i.e. take care of all household chores before engaging in outside activities which assumes that women's time is elastic. This not only limits the time women can spend in economic activities, but also restricts them to activities that are compatible with their home schedule. Thus, although a female laborer may not engage in outside work in the capacity of a "wife", her labor is defined as female, thereby carrying the inferior status into her workplace. Women's labor are undervalued and under-paid and has created a sex-segregated labor market with separate male and female working spheres. This is further enforced by the notion of

"women's work" and "men's work" and there is little incentive for men to take up jobs that are considered "women's work" except in cases where job bypasses gender roles e.g. chefs in the service industry.

At times women's labor have been considered as a superfluous work-force, as has been seen when all the women were relieved of their jobs when the men came back from the battle front to join their work in the factories after the end of the World Wars. They are the first to be retrenched during economic crisis.

Persistent challenges in the form of absence of women in decision making, stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory practices continue to perpetuate occupational segregation. Violence against women, including domestic violence is a major challenge worldwide. Harmful

traditional practices such as early marriage, dowry-giving to name a few, early childbearing and low education, constitute barriers to women's and girls' labor market entry.

On the Global Gender Gap Index⁹, the region with the largest absolute change is Latin America (with 4.18% of the gender gap closed), followed by North America (with 4.06% of the gender gap closed), Middle East and North Africa (with 3.08% of the gender gap closed), Sub-Saharan Africa (with 3.06% of the gender gap closed) and Europe and Central Asia (with 3.06% of the gender gap closed). Asia and the Pacific is the only region that shows a negative absolute change (with 3.15% of the gender gap widened). When compared to their own starting points nearly a decade ago, the order of relative change is exactly the same. *For details see Box 1.*

Box-1: Global Gender Gap Sub-Indices:

Economic Participation and Opportunity - the largest absolute increase has come from Latin America and the Caribbean (with 7.2% of the gender gap closed), followed by North America (with 6.9% of the gender gap closed), Europe and Central Asia (with 5.9% of the gender gap closed), Sub-Saharan Africa (with 5.6% of the gender gap closed), Middle East and North Africa (with 2.8% of the gender gap closed) and Asia and the Pacific (with 2.0% of the gender gap closed). Relative to the starting point in 2006, the order by magnitude of relative change is slightly different, with Europe surpassing North America. Economic Participation and Opportunity by region between 2006 and 2014.

Educational Attainment - the largest positive absolute change has come from the Middle East and North Africa, with 4.6% of its education gender gap being closed in the last decade. Next is Asia and the Pacific (with 3.1% of the gender gap closed), North America (with 1.5% of the gender gap closed), Latin America and the Caribbean (with 1.3% of the gender gap closed), and Europe and Central Asia (with 0.8% of the gender gap closed). In Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been an overall decline, by 2.8%, of gender gap closed.

Health and Survival - all regions experienced an absolute and relative decrease compared to their starting point in 2006. It is the only sub-index that is worsening for all regions compared to a decade ago.

Political Empowerment - the largest absolute increase has come from North America (with 8.6% of gender gap closed), followed by Latin America (with 8.3% of gender gap closed), Asia and the Pacific (with 7.9% of gender gap closed), Sub-Saharan Africa (with 7.3% of gender gap closed) and Europe and Central Asia (with 5.6% of gender gap closed). The Middle East region, while lowest by absolute change (5.6% of gender gap closed), is highest in terms of relative change, given the very low starting point nine years ago. In 2006 only 3.6% of the region's political gender gap had been closed; today 8.8% of this gap has been closed. It is the same as the order in terms of absolute change.



Image: apsdialogue.org

The ubiquitous ideology of patriarchy has continued to dominate all State structures and institutions.

In spite of studies that have proved that gender traits of masculinity and femininity are not inherent but learnt and except that of the biological role of reproduction there is no social role or not a single behavior that can be attributed to as distinguishing either sex, the ubiquitous ideology of patriarchy has continued to dominate all State structures and institutions. In many countries, women do not have legal rights to land and property and therefore unable to have access to credit, decent work and an assured income, that ownership would bring. As a result of the unequal entitlements to resources women and unequal distribution of care work, women are not only constrained by time poverty but also suffer from human poverty as they lack the means to uplift themselves

out of poverty. Discrimination against girls and women in the education sector, employment and market, health care services, the legal system, stereotyping of women as commodities and housewives in the media, have all severely debilitated women's confidence and mobility including their fundamental human rights to live a life of dignity and determine choices.

Market Integration and Women

Women's economic participation is widely recognized as a key driver of national and regional poverty alleviation and job creation. Women's work, both paid and unpaid, is critical to the survival and security of poor households and an important route through which

households escape poverty. Increased employment opportunities can improve women's mobility and address the lower rates of female labor force participation. Companies greatly benefit from increasing leadership opportunities for women, which is shown to increase organizational effectiveness. It is estimated that companies with three or more women in senior management functions score higher in all dimensions of organizational effectiveness.¹⁰

Today it is an established fact that women's participation in the workforce contributes to better economic performance. According to one study, greater female participation in the U.S. workforce since 1970 accounts for a quarter of current GDP.¹¹ Another study indicates that the reduction in the male-female employment gap has been an important driver of European economic growth in the last decade. Closing this gap would have massive economic implications for developed economies, boosting US GDP by as much as 9% and euro zone GDP by as much as 13%.¹² Conversely, limiting women's access to labor markets is costly. For example, Asia and the Pacific reportedly loses US\$42 billion to US\$47 billion annually as a region because of women's limited access to employment opportunities. Research by the World Bank demonstrates that similar restrictions have also imposed massive costs throughout the Middle East, where decades of substantial investment have dramatically reduced the gender gap in education but where the gender gap in economic opportunity remains the widest in the world.

Instead of looking at ways into how women can fit into the labor market construct that is essentially male-dominated/biased, eliminating gender stereotypes in the world of work by taking account of specific values and constraints of women across sectors where women work, the types of work they do, the relationship of women to their jobs, the wages they receive that impede their equal participation is vital for market integration. Such structural reforms need to go beyond broader economic considerations to address the social and cultural factors that have a

stronghold on maintaining the status quo i.e. unequal gender power relations. Gender equality cannot be achieved when biases remain entrenched in institutions and social and development processes.

Innovative approaches apart from equal opportunities employment and equal pay for equal work that seek to transform unjust structures and unequal gender relations should be actively pursued to address the structural, cultural and social barriers that impede women's entry into the labor market in the first place. Gender friendly work policies and mechanisms to address sexual harassment and abuse of authority, affirmative action for women to graduate into senior management roles family-friendly policies for women and men to balance family and professional responsibilities by introducing flexible working hours for pregnant women, mothers as well as fathers with new-born babies, crèche facilities for mothers to tend to their young children, transport for safe commuting during after office hours are some of the initiatives for market integration as diverse teams contribute to promoting gender equality and better financial performance. The key is to challenge norms and values for erasing the divide between “women's work” and “men's work” as gender inequality distorts women's access to opportunities, resources and capabilities for asset creation thus limiting their potential for advancement by making them dependent on men.

Deconstructing the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” that is associated with dominance and power upheld by patriarchal values and norms can be a strategic pathway for transforming negative aspects of masculinity, which are harmful to the economic and social success not only of women and girls, but to all members of society.¹³ Men too feel powerless and weighed down by the expectations of acting like a typical man. Boys emulate their fathers' behavior, which are internalized from childhood through the gender socialization process. **Men who have seen their own fathers engage in domestic work are themselves more likely to be**

involved in household work and caregiving as adults. This is also associated with lower rates of violence against children.¹⁴

Economic empowerment of women must link up with efforts to see how trade liberalization can offset the negative impacts on women by overcoming gender biases in the global market especially with regard to legislation and rule of law in improving the lives of women in general. Additionally the following are also some of key ingredients for women's holistic empowerment:

- Skill development by pairing skill training with job internship, vouchers or stipends as incentives for girls and women to enter the job market.
- Entrepreneurship skill training by establishing forward and backward linkages including the use of ICT and access to micro-finance services. Providing women with decent jobs to help them uplift their families out of poverty.
- Engage in gender budget audits for increased funding for social spending investments in sectors such as public health, education, child-care, and other social services.
- Development of Women's Progress Score-Card designed along three variables to measure:
 - (i) Capabilities: health and education attainment;
 - (ii) Opportunities: income, time use or employment and access to resources; and,
 - (iii) Agency: Representation in key decision-making processes and positions.

¹³Paper presented at the Conference on Feminism: Closing the Gender Gap organised by Social Democracy in Asia, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Olof Palme International Center, Singapore, 14 October, 2016

¹⁴Parpart, Connelly, and Barriteau, 2000.

³Asian and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, 1979

⁴UN System Task Team on the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda Social Protection: A Development Priority in the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda, May 2012

⁵Sustainable Cities Programme, Integrating Gender Responsiveness in Environment Planning and Management, ISBN 92-1-131455-0

⁶World Bank Gender Data Portal

⁷Cichon, 2014

⁸UN DESA 2010

⁹The Global Gender Gap Index measured by the World Economic Forum examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories (sub-indexes): *Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment.*

¹⁰Htun and Weldon, 2014

¹¹World Economic Forum, The Global Gender Gap Report 2014, p. 42

¹²Ibid

¹³ICRW (2015), Transformation by 2030: How Ending Gender-Based Violence and Engaging Men and Boys will Contribute to the World's Next Development Framework

¹⁴2015 State of the World Father's Report



SWEDEN'S ANTI-PROSTITUTION LAW:

The Case for Criminalization

Lawen Redar

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The Swedish ban of the purchase of sexual services entered into force on 1 January 1999. Thus, Sweden became the first country in the world to criminalize the purchase, but not the sale of sex. International interest in the Swedish model of criminalizing the purchase of sex has been, and is still, great. Through the years, many delegations visited Sweden to learn more about the ban and its application. Several countries have also taken after the Swedish model as Korea, South Africa, Iceland, Norway, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Canada, and as recently, France.

The Swedish sex purchase law stigmatizes not the one forced into prostitution. The purpose of the criminalization of the purchase is about allowing women to seek help, economic security or social networking if she wants to leave her life

as a prostitute. In the debate about prostitution it is sometimes said that it should be up to each one if someone wants to avail themselves sexually for monetary compensation and that there are those who do it voluntarily and enjoy it. **But it is important to understand that prostitution and trafficking are inevitably linked.** In Sweden, among those who are currently involved in prostitution, three out of four, according to the police, are women and girls from poor countries. Prostitution is a serious obstacle to gender equality and is incompatible with the requirement of human rights for all. In his report of March 2014, the European Parliament Rapporteur José Mendes Bota argued the concept of voluntary prostitution is a myth. **The majority of prostitution cases are consequence of either poverty or/and violence.**

In 2008, Attorney General Anna Skarhed was instructed to evaluate the application of the prohibition and the effects it had. The report was presented to the government in July 2010. **According to the report the prohibition was an important instrument for preventing and combating prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes.** The main conclusions of the evaluation were:

The number of people employed in street prostitution in Sweden was halved from 1999 to 2008;

Before the Swedish Sex Purchase Act came into force, the incidence of street prostitution were roughly equal in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Oslo. By 2008, the number of people in street prostitution was three times as many in Copenhagen and Oslo than in Stockholm;

The fear that street prostitution would go underground had not come true. All forms of prostitution need advertising to find customers and if the customers can find it then same also goes for the law enforcement authorities;

Prostitution via the Internet grew in Sweden during the period, but not because of the sex purchase law, but because of the increased use of the Internet in general. The report noted that prostitution via the Internet was much more widespread in Denmark and Norway than in Sweden;

The noticeable increase in prostitution in Denmark and Norway had no counterpart in Sweden and could not see any other reason than the effect of criminalization of sex purchases;

According to the Police Authority (formerly the National Police), the ban on buying sex prevented the establishment of organized crime in Sweden. The law has served as barriers against trafficking in Sweden, beating the buyers have been essential in efforts to find and prosecute cases of trafficking;

Before the law took effect, there were many who were critical, but surveys conducted after 2009 showed that the law has the support of about 70 percent of the population. **The ban on buying sex has thus both reduced prostitution and has also had a normative effect.**

The investigation did not find any negative effects on people who found themselves in prostitution;

One could, however, see that the resources of the judicial authorities were crucial for the effectiveness of the work against prostitution and human trafficking can be conducted.

Finally, we will work to ensure that the purchase of sexual services for Swedish citizens abroad should also be criminalized.

The purpose of the criminalization of the purchase is about allowing women to seek help, economic security or social networking if she wants to leave her life as a prostitute.



WOMAN, POLITICS AND MEN WHO CANT STAND US

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Malaysia is undergoing interesting times. At the time of writing, the country is walking the tightrope between increasing Chinese investment and presence in the country and U.S. unease at this, the death of Kim Jong-nam on Malaysian soil, and a Prime Minister tackling an international financial scandal. Politically, the country seems more divided than ever, with an impending general election expected in the next few months.

It is easy to forget the women empowerment agenda amidst all these. Although women make up more than 50% of the world's population, we are still sorely under-represented, especially in political matters and other decision-making aspects within our society. Because of this, we simply have fewer influences over policies – in other words, men continue to dictate how we

live and our choices. This is more so as the country seems to be taking the turn for further religious-radicalisation resulting in society becoming more conservative.

Women continue to be underrepresented in politics: out of 222 Members of Parliament, only 23 are women, a mere 10.8%, a score which has earned Malaysia the second last place in South East Asia. According to the United Nations, there is indeed a need to meet the minimum 30% threshold to achieve progress and reforms pertaining to policies and existing legislative institutions. Increasing the participation of women in politics will definitely bring about positive changes – think about the numerous social issues and local development issues that can be undertaken in a more balance and more equitable manner.

There are costs to low women representation: according to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), women politicians are much more committed to pushing for policies for marginalized groups. The NDI also argues that higher number of women politicians means lower levels of corruption. That is not all: women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure, health and peace-building.

Decision-making is always best when there is equal representation from both genders. Women are a significant part of society, and we should be considered to share our experiences and perspectives to the political process. Politics is about how decisions are made, how conflicts can be resolved and how the people can benefit from the policies that have been imposed. Therefore to obtain the best results and best practices, there is great importance

for local governments to understand gender roles, responsibilities as well as the need to identify factors that can affect gender relations.

The main goal of equal representation is to increase the quality of life. But if the opposite gender continues to be under-represented (which is regrettably the case for Malaysian society), social progress and communal development will come to a standstill.

There are several factors that contribute to limiting women's participation – gender stereotypes, gender discrimination, and a variety of personal obstacles such as lack of confidence and lack of support from family members. Politics at all levels is often regarded as being a 'boys club' – a heavily male-dominated field – and how can people not think otherwise?

Patriarchy and women

Patriarchy has long been identified as one of the major barriers to women's development and empowerment. In general, the Asian culture is one that presupposes “natural” male superiority over women – authority within the family and society are usually given to men. Resulting to women who feel inferior due to having certain legal rights removed, mobility and freedom restricted. Some of the men in governing positions often ridicule the female biological form and use this as an excuse to prevent women from taking on leading positions in the government. Some even go as far as blaming women for instigating rape, domestic violence and other forms of sexual harassment.

But what worsens the effects of patriarchy, is when the women in our society seem to be dangerously comfortable with it. These women passively permit male-induced values to dominate their lives and refuse to empower others within their communities. They meekly comply with the standards and warn other women to not be too liberal in their thinking and by no means, question male authority. Most of the time, the women they appoint lack the awareness and understanding needed to carry the feminist torch.

Carol Hanisch, one of the organizers who staged the famous 1968 Miss America pageant protest clarified in numerous interviews that, although, the protesters had intended to burn brassieres – the police who stood nearby prevented them from carrying out such an act of defiance. So the pseudo-intellectuals aren't entirely at fault for assuming such things but when someone in a government position fails to do their homework (i.e. to confirm the legitimacy of such an incident), the public can be less forgiving.

What are the steps taken to boost the low levels of women participation in Malaysian politics?

For one, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), has been vocal in calling for higher women participation rates. The opposition party controlling the most number of federal parliamentary seats is one of the political parties with the most number of female representatives and top leaders in the country.

Not satisfied with merely pressuring the federal government from the opposition bench, DAP has led by example in Penang, a state where it heads the state government. The two mayors of the two Penang local councils (Penang Island City Council and Seberang Perai Municipal Council) are women. There has also been a steady increase in female local councillors in recent years. To take a step further, in 2017, the Penang Island City Council has achieved the goal of having 33% women councillors – this percentage does not include department heads and others in decision-making roles.

There are ways to combat this; creating mentor programmes where prominent women (especially those in politics) can advocate and share their experiences with other women. Communities also need to support capacity-building (in particular skills – in listening, speaking, negotiating) pertaining to issues in local government to help create gender-sensitive working environments such as gender-responsive participatory budgeting as implemented by Penang Island City Council and Seberang Perai Municipal Council in cooperation with the Penang Women's Development Corporation (a state funded

agency that '*works towards the transformation of Penang into an advanced and progressive society through the promotion of equality among all women and men, girls and boys, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender or socioeconomic background*').

The impact of such policies could be distinctly felt. Women political participation has frequently become a topic in discourse. As a Penang Member of Parliament The Honourable Steven Sim puts it, “There is an improvement definitely, but more importantly there is awareness. Male politicians and their obsession with percentages of female representation in leadership are trying to portray themselves as 'doing something' about this issue.”

While there is much merit in focusing on mainstreaming gender in all areas of public life, we should not take our eyes off the daily struggles faced by the common woman in the street. Gender-based crime and violence, including domestic violence and sexual abuse, has shown no signs of reducing. It is essential, even commonsensical, for activists, policy and lawmakers, to first ensure that the safety of women are sufficiently protected. The process should be bottoms-up: women are, first of all, safe, before they could venture further in life. The Malaysian government has announced that it is tabling the Domestic Violence Act 1994 for amendments in the current parliamentary sitting. Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim, has pledged to give the statute more bite. A remark by the Minister during the press conference was an interesting give-away: YB Rohani had remarked that the amendments would also protect male victims.

While the amendments are a welcome development, the remark goes to show how even female politicians may misunderstand the true picture of the lived experience of the common women. Domestic violence victims are overwhelmingly women, from suffering abuse, seeking legal action, and going to the authorities for shelter and protection. It is therefore unfortunate that the majority of the victims were not given the due attention by the Minister during the press conference.



Image: www.abc.net.au

Culturally, in Malaysia for example, society continues to show bias against women who, whether accidentally or otherwise, have made it to public attention.

Culturally, in Malaysia for example, society continues to show bias against women who, whether accidentally or otherwise, have made it to public attention. Natasha Qisty Mohd Ridzuan who scored straight As in Malaysia's final high school examination, was met with hostile criticisms on the Internet. Users poured disdain, with remarks focusing on her cosmetics and her accent. Such is the reality of the lived experience of Malaysian women, where achievement in itself may not be enough to curry favour with society.

These invisible yet powerful elements are not to be disregarded, as they may even be more instrumental in hampering the advance of women in societies than structural obstacles. While human rights advocates and activists continue pushing for women to be represented at high

levels, we should also remember that the bottom affects the top as well. It is unthinkable to be able to rise to the top if basic concerns such as personal safety is not a given.

In conclusion, the women agenda continues to take a sideline in the midst of all that is happening in Malaysia. Much more is needed to be done to mainstream gender in all aspects of life. There is a need to formulate methods that can create awareness surrounding gender issues and especially find strategic ways to encourage more women's participation in local government. One of the barriers often faced by women is that we sometimes feel there is a lack of respect when compared to male counterparts, as if a woman's opinion carry less weight and ideas are seen as drivel.

Women have been conditioned by societal constraints and man-made cultural values. Women have been conditioned to set aside expertise in order to give way to the traditional male role of political activity. The term, 'public male, private female', is such a term that is highly reflective of the patriarchal values that are deeply rooted in present day Malaysian society, and this idea is counter-productive to progress.

Malaysian women want reform and desire to see certain standings revolutionize. Malaysian women have awakened and will no longer be subdued into passively accepting a system that is tainted with misogyny, bigotry and male supremacy.

Although numbers can reflect certain relevance, they do not guarantee the success in our bid to uphold women's rights. Changing the mindset of our already patriarchal society will be a long battle, but addressing the need to increase our presence can bring about the type of gender equality that can ensure more positive outcomes for women – and men, too.

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WE ARE WHO WE ARE:

Reflections of a Young Queer Feminist

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OMG, you're a feminist? Me too!

A defining feature of fourth wave millennial feminism is to come out as feminist regardless of the sex or gender you are born into – which makes you part of a community, while remaining an individual in the circle. This then makes the modern feminist movement a Collective of Individuals.

This may be in part a criticism of overoptimism of adherents of the third wave, their complacency resulting to hyper-individualist and gender-blind approach to treating equality, but also reaffirming their inclusive, identity-based and cultural approach. Meanwhile, it is also a realization of the validity of the second wave movement's claim of feminism as a power and privilege maldistribution issue, therefore trying to

create a bifocal lens of looking at female oppression.

Fourth wave feminism recognizes that the elephant remains in the room if we stay in the feminine-masculine layer of the discussion, because it doesn't answer the realities of how there are masculine women who still earn 80 cent for every dollar earned by even feminine men; how the gay rights movement is being headed by white, middle class gay men and women; how although cases of feminine men and women victimization is still prevalent, it is still a fact that in lesbian relationships, 'butch' lesbians are reportedly more victimized than their feminine counterparts. In other words, while the feminine is, in fact, degraded, the social status of women, in particular, is still not at par with that of men – no matter the level of femininity or masculinity.

WOKE Millennials: The Sitch

In a 2012 Women's Political Participation Report in the Asia Pacific sponsored by the UNDP (True, Niner, Parashar, & George, 2012), one of the key findings was that on the average, **women's political participation in the Asia and the Pacific subregions - Pacific (3.65% - excluding New Zealand and Australia), East Asia (17.6%), Southeast Asia (18.09%), and South Asia (19.76%) – were below the global average.** This was attributed to the general political, social, and cultural mentalities that justify the rhetoric that politics is not the place for women.

As a solution to this, the gender quota has been employed by progressive political parties to increase the number of women representation – and according to the 2012 study, it works. More women are

represented in progressive political parties and organizations and in countries (Mongolia, Nepal, Timor Leste, Afghanistan, New Caledonia) that employ the mechanism.

In her book “Fortunes of Feminism”, Nancy Fraser however critiques the francophone parity principle being because it may increase numbers, however, the focus on recognition or representation in the higher ups – whether in public or private entities – endangers feminism in colluding with neoliberal ideals, creating “trickle down feminism”. Although there is a high correlation between policies that are oriented towards social welfare (i.e. recognition of reproductive work, laws against domestic abuse) when more women are in seats in the government, gender quota will remain tokenistic and identity driven if the twin sibling of patriarchy–capitalism is still in place and entrenched in society – each an enabler of the other.

Women are less likely to be accepted into jobs for example that require manual labor, because of two main things – menstruation and pregnancy. In a market-based, capitalist global economy, efficiency is key – and women are not logical choices because during these two events in their life, they are of no use to productive work – and this without recognizing the importance of reproductive work. Women representation in the high-level business positions does not mean empowerment of the “low-level” positions in the company. **In the same way that an increase in the numbers of women in parliament doesn't necessarily translate into empowered grassroots women.**

Case in point is the Philippines, where a significant number of women are in position of power. Their legislations are geared towards basic social services and social justice – however, it remains a glass ceiling for majority of women in the grassroots to participate in politics. **Many of the women in power come from political dynasties or have elite backgrounds. The political sphere is still co-opted by the same**



Image: www.apec.org

Women representation in the high-level business positions does not mean empowerment of the “low-level” positions in the company.

‘old boys club’, with their wives serving as place-holders rather than real wielders of power.

The legal system is stacked against women, since there is neither abortion or divorce law. Due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church, the Reproductive Health Law took more than a decade to pass and many more years before implemented. There remains no social protection for women involved in prostitution; reported and unreported cases of rape and domestic abuse are still high. (In other places in Asia like India and Singapore, as long as a woman is above 13 years old there are no laws against marital rape, while in Malaysia where marital rape is still a debated issue! The election of President Rodrigo Duterte has reinforced a culture of machismo and authoritarianism, with no less than the commander-in-chief often engaging in remarks that degrade and

objectify women, including his notorious 'rape joke' during the presidential campaign.

The clear cut problem of feminism is patriarchy, and solutions have been laid out by our “mothers” and “grandmothers” in the movement:

- *Education* - access to education for all girls, expanded and deepened academic discourse on patriarchy and intersectionality through women's and queer studies, and studies that provide insight into women's oppression, comprehensive sex education);
- *Political representation and empowerment* (increasing number of women in government, trainings for women in governance, legislating laws that protect women from abuse and

amending anti-women laws thereof, generating public awareness towards the fulfilment of women's rights, appropriating government budget to gender and development, broad base coalitions and movements that fight for equality – especially with and for marginalized communities, marriage equality, divorce);

- *Economic empowerment and recognition* (boosting the care economy, recognition of reproductive work, access to capital and property ownership, awareness of the dangers of multiple burden); *health and reproductive rights* (increased control of women over our own bodies through the access to the pill, abortion rights – albeit in a few countries only, general acceptance of the female sexuality, HIV-AIDS awareness), and young feminists have the burden of continuing and cementing these reforms. The key may be in the queer millennials and Generation Z.

MORE THAN A PHASE - Millennials and Generation Z are Queer AF

In modern parlance, it is somehow uncommon to talk about feminism and not talk about gender equality. Recent study by the J. Walter Thompson Innovation Group (Laughlin, 2016), a trend forecasting agency, shows that around 52 percent of Generation Z (aged 13-20 years old) do not identify as exclusively heterosexual, while the figure stands at thirty five percent 35 percent for their older counterparts, the millennials (aged 21-34).

The sudden “Queer Surge” is partly thanks to the gender bending effect of the Information Age, the general acceptance of a sexualized body as non-threatening, and the increase of identity-based emphasis of third wave feminism. The acceptance of gender fluidity is spreading like wildfire among the Generation Z -- thanks to celebrities coming out as gender fluid, namely Disney sweethearts we grew up with such as Miley Cyrus and Raven Symone, among others. The message is clear: We are here, and we are queer, indeed.

This phenomenon coupled with the embedded influence of second wave feminism on the general positive attitudes towards participatory democracy and flat hierarchies coming from the feminist processes used in consciousness-raising groups then, we have some ingredients down for building a progressive, feminist future.

According to a study by Gayle Kimball (Kimball, 2014), it has been observed that “horizontal organizing for recent uprisings have been easier for those socialized to be female than those socialized to be male” – and in these social movements, there is likely a politics of love. This is clearly seen in the campaign for marriage equality where the emphasis on love and human gut feel appealed to the masses and increased demand for the passage of marriage equality law.

BECAUSE the world is our BAE

But what exactly do young feminists want? We want an inclusive world, a participatory democracy where everyone leads themselves and others.

What does this mean? This means we need to work against the authoritarian, hierarchical wave of leadership that is spreading globally. The rise of global populism is a threat the feminist ideals of equality. Although, we have to keep in mind that the shortcoming of most youth-led movements have been leaving a vacuum in the seat of power -- abandoning it for the taking by other dominant elite forces. We are good at opposing, but we are not trained for governance – and most of us are reluctant – but we have to assist the redistribution of power that we pursue. But how will this work?

We are good at opposing, but we are not trained for governance – and most of us are reluctant – but we have to assist the redistribution of power that we pursue.

Image: www.theasiantoday.com



First, create global network of young feminists need to be created that works towards protecting participatory democracy with a specific slant towards women in the grassroots (i.e. in Southeast Asia where the growing authoritarian rule threatens democracy) and create and mainstream a bottom-up, peer-to-peer feminist power agenda that channels the information savvy, impatient, altruistic nature of millennials. This global network must have a Council of Tomorrow (Toffler, 1970) – a council of equals elected into position, other than the usual administrative posts – that looks into trends and prepares the network for them – whether what to do with holograms or dealing with the deep web, they should have that covered;

Second, invest in talent and not plans which means to train young women and feminists for governance - skills on drawing the sharpest line and proposing the progressive alternatives that increase spaces for women in the grassroots to enter politics (e.g. support in terms of resources, trainings on developing legislative agenda, etc.), address issues of online gender based violence and abuse through policies and grievance mechanisms – no matter the change of times, they need to be agile enough to govern through changing times;

Third, create a framework of what a feminist economy looks like – participatory economy, which emphasizes the equal importance of reproductive and productive work, develops the queer economy, puts a human lens on trade agreements, prioritizes basic social services in national budget allocations for starters. Fourth, incorporate feminist values in basic education curriculum to assist behavioural change, and pushing feminist discourse from academic to public forums – bringing back the consciousness-raising groups created during the second wave of feminism. Fifth, create an online based crowdfunding platform that specifically aims to support broad-based feminist organizing– financial resources. Another online platform to share stories of activism on podcasts on SoundCloud, Blogs and Vlogs, online platforms for sharing ideas, academic literature and



Image: www.riseforindia.com

encouraging each other, while infiltrating mainstream media (radio, print, TV, social media) breaking stereotypes from there.

Sixth, create a credible and accurate data gathering mechanism and rubrics that reflect actual gender equality attitude in the ground along with women empowerment aside from the rubrics created by the UN. Seventh, forge a formidable coalition with the working class, teachers and professors, unemployed college students and the civil society – the drivers of protest action in information age – and people who have enough time and are willing to give time to the movement (according to recent trend of uprisings globally.

These seven initial suggestions are reflections of the mindset of feminist millennials, who have and continue to derive guidance and inspiration from earlier generations as they try to make a legacy of our own, both online and offline.

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GENDER INEQUALITY IN TIMOR-LESTE:

The need for investment towards change of mindset

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Gender inequality is a reality in Timor-Leste, and the process to change it has been facing several obstacles on political, economical and social levels. Timor-Leste has been a free, independent nation for only 14 years, after 400 years of Portuguese colonisation and 24 years of Indonesian occupation, during which hundreds of thousands were killed. Timorese women had important roles in all fronts (armed, clandestine and diplomatic) of the resistance movement initiated and led by FRETILIN. Many women were victims of violence (including rape) during the occupation period, and many watched their fathers, husbands and brothers killed.

Today, the small island nation with a land area of 14,954 square kilometres, has a rapidly growing population of around 1,167 million people (Timor-Leste 2015 Census), and about half are women.

Article 17 of the country's constitution states: "Women and men shall have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, political, economic, social and cultural life". The reality is quite different, since strong patriarchal beliefs are entrenched within the Timorese society.

Since it regained its independence, Timor-Leste has been through a process of rapid social change and the Timorese families have been adapting to the new conditions in the country. Changes are noticeable in regards to social behaviour, and are challenging the traditional division of labour and roles within the society, both for men and women.

The reality and the most vulnerable

Women and children, at all levels of the society, are still the most vulnerable.

The reality is quite different, since strong patriarchal beliefs are entrenched within the Timorese society.

Women and children with disabilities are even more vulnerable. This is a result from the asymmetric power imbalance in gender relations.

Timor-Leste has one of the highest birth rates in the world (5.7 children per women), which include high numbers of teenage pregnancy, with only 30% of the births being attended by skilled health staff, and therefore having high rates of maternal and child mortality.



Image: www.un.org

*The tetun word commonly used for rape is “**estraga**” (break), thus raped victims are seen as “broken”, making them become even less valued.*

Chronic malnutrition is also an issue of concern in the country, being women and children the most affected, with more than **one third of children below 5 years of age being underweight**.

High prevalence of violence against women is a disconcerting issue in the country. Latest studies have shown that almost 60% of women have been victims of violence at least once in their lifetime since the age of 15, and most of the time the perpetrator was a partner. Sexual Violence against children is also common, including incest cases. Usually, survivors of sexual violence not only have to overcome the trauma caused by the violence they have suffered but many times they are stigmatised by members of their communities. The *tetun* word

commonly used for rape is “*estraga*” (break), thus raped victims are seen as “broken”, making them become even less valued.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international treaty adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGC), along with and Law Against Domestic Violence has been approved in the county. Unfortunately, **however, implementation is still weak. Commonly, cases are only reported when the injuries are very serious and with some physical injury, emotional violence and controlling behaviour are still ignored and not understood as forms of violence.**

For cases that are reported, it can take a long time until a court decision is made, as the judicial system cannot cope with the load of cases they have on their hands. Studies have also shown that the acceptance of violence is common amongst both men and women. **Violence against children is seen as a parenting educational mechanism, and marital rape is not even understood as a concept.**

Many times, domestic violence cases are dealt between the families and, for more serious cases, mediated through traditional justice systems.

Violence, like many other behaviour traits, is learned and because it is part of many households, we can observe the younger generations repeating the same violence cycles with their own families.

Traditional gender roles and the constraints to equality

On gender equality related debates, culture is commonly raised, as it challenges the traditional gender roles of the society. Since gender roles and identities are important components of culture, changes in gender relations are not well accepted as they have direct influence on the daily lives of the individuals. Policy wise, on a national level, Timor-Leste has framed national policies that embrace equality and equity principles, but in practice it meets numerous impediments due to very strong traditional roles.

Women are expected to have domestic duties as their main responsibility, while men are the main decision makers. Gender-based power imbalance in the households is mirrored in the society as a whole, and both men and women tend to accept inequality as the normal way of living. The customary or traditional practices are still very common and seem to have been strengthened across the country, since it became independent. It involves mediation between the families on several community matters, including the ones related to gender relations, from *barlake* (bride price) and marriage to domestic violence cases.

Customary systems of dispute settlement, meanwhile, don't usually include women, but instead male members of their families.

Women representation and participation: a remaining challenge

Timor-Leste has one of the highest numbers of women in Parliament (38%), also due to an existent quota. The Law on Election of National parliament, which was approved in 2006 and amended in 2011, requires that parties present their lists with one woman in every three candidates.

On the Central Government, around 21% of its members are women, including in key portfolios such as **Finance, Health, Education and Social Solidarity**. On the other hand, at grassroots level women are still highly underrepresented. The last community leadership elections were held last November and from the country's 442 *sucos* (villages), 20 elected women as their chiefs, which represent an increase of 2.5% compared to the previous elections. It is, without a doubt, a sign of positive change, but it is still at a very slow speed.

Women's participation in the labour force is still very low (21%), compared to 50% of men population which are part of the labour force. Unpaid work, such as domestic work and subsistence agriculture work are undervalued and mainly dominated by women.

Quotas: a necessary first step towards increase of participation

The existent gender quota for Parliament members list has proven to help Timor-Leste to achieve a higher number of women involved in the legislative body. Some groups argue that the quota system is not the answer for women inclusion as it does not guarantee that qualified women get involved. **Having in mind that the first necessary step is to give access to women, the gender quota for National Parliament has**



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The next step should be to provide programs with focus on skills improvement, especially related to leadership and policy-making.

proven to be helpful first step. The next step should be to provide programs with focus on skills improvement, especially related to leadership and policy-making.

Quota policies can also be implemented at other levels, such as management and even as part of requirements for private enterprises and organisations, to ensure that more women get involved and are able to have access to participation.

Violence against Women and Children – the need for stronger frameworks

Studies and reports have already shown how serious the violence against women and children is in Timor-Leste. The government has included it in the priority issues of its program, and a national action plan has been developed and approved. In line with that, there are many programs being developed and

implemented, by government and non governmental organisations (national and international). Unfortunately, since state institutions are still very weak, implementation is always a challenge. Coordination amongst the different actors is still not efficient, resulting in duplication of work. Most of the focus has been on the service provision and legal assistance for the survivors, and little to prevention. As many of those programs are implemented with donor funding, the risk of lack of sustainability and continuity is always an issue. **Strengthening of the existent policies and regulations, and the institutions to implement them, is urgently needed.** Of equal urgency is the prioritisation of fiscal allocation for related services (for both the survivors and the perpetrators), the criminal justice system and prevention programs.

Elimination of Violence against women and children can only be

achieved if survivors have the necessary support to overcome the traumas, perpetrators can have access to services to assist with rehabilitation, the justice system has the resources to manage the cases, and the new generations are raised to not accept violence and gender inequality as the normal life standard.

Education and health: two key instruments for change

Health and Education are basic human rights, and gender equality should be a basic consideration for both areas. A healthy and educated population lead to the well being of women, men and children, which is crucial for the social and economical development of the nation.

Current attitudes towards gender, and the patriarchal mindset, are learned. Learned from the society, learned within the households. By changing how the members of the society are educated it will be possible to achieve the change of mindsets and, consequently, achieve a change on attitudes and behaviour.

Education policies ensuring that curriculums are gender sensitive, guaranteeing that formal and informal programs, targeted at both men and women (with special attention to the youth) have a behaviour change focus and that the information shared through those programs are gender sensitive.

Women health, including family planning and pre- and post-natal care, need to be prioritised and reinforced. Public education and health are free, as per National Constitution, but the systems are weak and not providing quality services. There should be policies and investments to strengthen the systems to provide quality services to people as they are entitled to. Financial investment is necessary to be done by the state to improve the infrastructure and for increased development of professional skills and work conditions of the people responsible for the everyday work to guarantee those services.

Support systems towards increasing women participation

The change of mindset and attitudes is a process that takes generations, through appropriate approaches. For the short term, it is also necessary to think about how to create the necessary conditions, bearing in mind the social and cultural context, to enable women to take advantage of the opportunities that are available.

Family and childcare, for example, are one of the reasons why many women do not pursue their careers. Policies and programs to support them are necessary. Childcare facilities or groups and special leave for parents to be with the children when they are sick, are examples of policies and programs that can be developed.

Political will, gender sensitive budget and Gender mainstreaming

Political will is essential for the country to develop, and development initiatives always have an impact on gender relations, regardless of having gender equality issue as focus. For that reason, to guarantee that the impacts are positive, it is essential that the planning take gender equality issues into consideration and that the planned output include gender equality results.

That same will is key in order to push for stricter implementation of the existent policies and regulations and strengthening of the state institutions. A comprehensive strategy of gender mainstreaming and good governance has to be implemented, including equality and equity approaches, involving both men and women. **The concept of gender equality is still not properly understood in Timor-Leste, and many times seen as “women's issues to be dealt by women” and “against local traditions and culture”.**

The changes need and will be pushed by some sectors of the society, while other sectors try to resist. The different actors and sectors must have their voice heard during the process, to ensure that a balanced assessment is done.

As gender expectations exist also for men, the changes on gender relationships impacts how men live. For that reason, men need to be involved in the process towards gender equality, so that they can understand the benefits from it. The complexity of the movement can be overwhelming and, it can only succeed by having coherent planning and prioritisation of gender equality related issues.

Finally, when looking into gender equality approaches, it is important to keep in mind that there aren't a “one size fits all” solution, and different countries, societies and/or communities can respond differently to the each approach. Cultural sensitivity is necessary on the policy-making processes, but without forgetting that those processes must always consider the constant evolution of cultural values and the different factors that can cause the evolution we require towards gender equality.

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