

In Praise of Southeast Asian Women

by Nancy Spence

Southeast Asia has experienced admirable, if not phenomenal economic growth, largely through trade led and robust free market economies. So one might reasonably ask...why need women be singled out for special support for their rights? At first glance, this might appear valid. In Southeast Asia, women have benefited from the same flush of success that all of Asia is experiencing. But there is considerable evidence that in the drive for liberalized private sector expansion, there has been a significant "equity gap" both in the distribution and impact of this economic growth. Nowhere is it more pronounced than along gender lines.

It is women who primarily face the "downside" of unbridled free market economies. While women's labour has been an integral part of this economic expansion, it has often come at the expense of women's health, human dignity, working conditions, and the education and training demanded in high-tech economies. Industrialization and multi-national corporate growth has too often come at the expense of decent working conditions, without sufficient attention paid to nutrition, child care, and long hours worked. Women are victims as capital moves to increasingly cheaper sources of cheap labour. Vietnam is now feeling what Thailand and Malaysia have experienced.

The shifts in labour demands over the past decade have resulted in migrant domestic labour force, often called the "maid trade", where qualified nurses and teachers from the Philippines can make more money as domestic helpers in other Asian countries, but at great cost to family welfare. New regional growth in the ASEAN has caused husbands to take up "new wives" in their host countries, further destabilizing family life. The "commodification" of women's la-

bour has also contributed to a sex trade industry which has harmed women's health, dignity, and family values.

The voices of women are gathering. Women make up less than three per cent of political representation in Southeast Asia. Their voices are not heard through traditional national level power structures. Nor are women's issues supported sufficiently, particularly at the NGO level, by national governments. But women have used non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and networks as an alternative route to lobby for equity and change in their lives. Women's development issues in the region transcend national boundaries, and increasingly, women have worked at the regional level to address common issues. Over 22 regional level women's non-governmental organizations have sprung up in the past five years to press for change for women. One innovative ngo is the Centre for Women in Politics, newly created as a network in a number of Asian countries to better define the kind of politics that women feel is needed for a decent and equal society.

Women are natural "networkers" and this regional approach has proven to be a powerful advocacy tool allowing women to build consensus, draw upon collective strength, and deliver more credible impact at national levels. This has helped raise "valuable lessons learned" for the newly emerging transition/market economies of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia who have been increasingly invited to share the experiences of "women's realities" in NIC growth.

The CIDA Regional Program has been an active supporter in this process. Since 1990, two Women's Regional Funds totalling over one million dollars have allowed for over 55 projects of support to assist women to

identify common issues, seek consensus, and strategize for change. Key here has been the support to women's issues from a macro-level and policy perspective.

The period prior to the Fourth World Conference on Women set for Beijing in 1995 has afforded a unique opportunity for CIDA to support a democratic process and to ensure that grassroots and issue-oriented women's organizations play their rightful role in the official process. It has also assisted grassroots women to learn about the issues and become involved. Whenever possible the Fund has matched experiences from Southeast Asia with Canadian experiences so that a two way learning process can occur.

The materials in this publication for Beijing are an example of this process. Two years ago, Dr Shelagh Wilkinson visited the region and met many of the NGOs and women researchers/activists in Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. She came back to Canada enthusiastic to put together a publication with a Guest Editorial Board made up of some of the excellent women colleagues that she met. One year later, here it is. "Women's Rights are Human Rights": an example of the dedication and foresight and enthusiasm that women in Canada and Southeast Asia share.

The Canadian International Development Agency is proud to have been a catalyst in this process. We hope that women around the world can enjoy this publication as much as we enjoyed being involved in its development.

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