



POWER, VOICE and RIGHTS

A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific

Embargoed until 8 March 2010, 10:30 am (New Delhi time)

Fewer Women in Asia-Pacific own land than elsewhere

Laws not helping women

New Delhi, 8 March 2010—Women head only 7 per cent of the farms in Asia Pacific, compared to 20 per cent in most other parts of the world, yet they do most of the agricultural work the United Nations Development Programme reported today.

Asia-Pacific as a whole has the worst performance in women’s economic power with women lagging far behind men in the ownership and control of assets, and in their ability to earn in most of the region, declares the latest UNDP-sponsored Asia Pacific Human Development Report, *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*.

Customary laws and inheritance practices overwhelmingly favour men as they remain deeply embedded in traditions often drawn from interpretations of religion. In the Pacific, two in three countries have customary land inheritance laws that discriminate against women, as do half the countries in South and West Asia and one in three in East Asia. Historically and traditionally too land ownership has been skewed toward men in much of Asia-Pacific because land is closely associated with economic and political power.

In a growing number of countries land rights for women are guaranteed in law but in practice women cannot take their rightful inheritance for granted because of poor legal implementation or male bias in bequeathing property. Exceptions include Bhutan, where women own an estimated 70 per cent of the land, and Sri Lanka, where most women inherit some land, even though these amounts may be unequal to men. Several countries in East Asia, including Cambodia, China and Viet Nam, have attempted land reforms designed to deliberately combat discrimination in land ownership.

Women, who can acquire, retain and control assets – by themselves, not just through husbands or relatives – rise in social and economic standing. This can translate into greater bargaining positions in households and a stronger voice in public affairs. “Significant links exist between women’s ownership of a house or land and a reduced risk of marital violence, deterring such behaviour by visibly signaling the strength of a woman’s fallback position and tangible exit option” said Ajay Chhibber, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Director of UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, at the launch of the Report today.

Microenterprises flourish in Asia

Microenterprises have become an important way for poor women to build assets. Globally, Asia has the largest number of microcredit borrowers and the highest percentage of poor women borrowers. In Asia 98 per cent of microcredit borrowers in 2006 were women, compared with 66 per cent in Africa and 62 per cent in Latin America.

Women end up with the worst jobs

While high economic growth rates and changing social norms have brought women in the region into the paid workforce in record numbers, there are wide disparities within Asia and the Pacific. A total of 67 per cent of East Asian women participate in the labour force, well above the global average of 53 per cent, but South Asian women are far behind, at only 36 per cent.

The labour market remains rife with gender inequalities. Despite laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, women in Asia-Pacific still earn considerably less than men – in some cases the difference may approach as much as 50 per cent. They “consistently end up with some of the worst, most poorly paid jobs – often the ones that men don’t want to do, or that are assumed to be ‘naturally’ suited to women,” the Report says.

Women are migrating to other countries in search of work in numbers that are equal to men and in some Asian countries they outnumber men. For instance between 60-80 per cent of all legal migrants for work from Indonesia and Sri Lanka are women. Collectively, migrants make an enormous economic contribution through remittances, which for some Asia-Pacific countries now rival or exceed sums from foreign direct investment. Yet most are in low paid or unsafe jobs. For instance 90 per cent of women migrant workers from Sri Lanka work as domestic workers in the Middle East. Making mobility safer and more productive for women would help not only the economy, but importantly the quality of women’s lives.

More investment in education and healthcare

More equal inheritance laws, land reforms that favour women’s right to land and improved access to quality education and skills are some of the key reforms recommended to improve women’s access to assets and to more and better paid jobs.

“Education systems still perpetuate gender stereotypes and fall short of adequately preparing women for the workplace. And social attitudes can hinder even educated women – they may still have limited control over decisions that affect their lives, including basic choices such as where

to work and how to spend their earnings.” explained Anuradha Rajivan, leader of the multinational team that prepared the UNDP-sponsored Report.

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For more information and to access the 2010 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report and the complete press kit please visit: <http://www2.undprcc.lk/ext/pvr/>

ABOUT THE ASIA-PACIFIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT: *Asia-Pacific Human Development Reports have become a regular series under the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. The Reports provide continuing analyses of critical long term development issues relevant at both the regional and country levels. The Asia- Pacific Human Development Report Series offers the region a forum for furthering dialogues and structuring debates to support a people-centered agenda.*

ABOUT THE UNDP’S REGIONAL CENTRE FOR ASIA–PACIFIC: *The UNDP’s Regional Centre for Asia Pacific, Colombo Office, was established in January 2005 to serve countries of Asia-Pacific. It is a regional hub for development knowledge and expertise, providing policy advisory, capacity development and advocacy services. UNDP works in 37 countries in Asia-Pacific.*

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