

Report: Women's situation in ASEAN and Thailand

By: Sunee

ASEAN's entry to one community integration has made headlines worldwide. With full aspiration to be one of the integrated competitive markets, ASEAN will have free movement of capital and of skilled labor. This invites both opportunities, but mostly threats to local economy especially on the livelihoods for women.

ASEAN governments including Thailand is spending its resources to raise awareness and preparedness for ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), but general public still do not have a proper understanding of the AEC and its implications. The perceived fear, especially fear of losing job, marketplace and bigger corporations get more powerful will not be far from reality.

Alike everywhere else in the world, ASEAN faces multiple crises of finance, food, democracy, environment, refugees, VAW, human rights and also growing inequalities. ASEAN with its economic integration, and allying with other regional mechanisms like ASEAN+, APEC, indicates its strong adoption of neo-liberal economic policies. Some ASEAN states like Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia are even signatory to the horrendous trade agreement deal: - Trans-pacific Partnership (TPP).

The neo-liberal led economic development model has brought wealth, power and resources to only tiny minority in ASEAN. There are inequalities between countries, with Brunei Darusallam, Singapore and Malaysia as one of rich countries, while Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are still struggling with poverty. Whereas. within these countries too, there are huge inequalities.

Women fall behind men in number of areas like education, healthcare, and access to employment, wages, work hours and the holding of leadership positions. In addition, land rights and access to credit and information technology are not easily available to women. Rural women and the urban poor remain most vulnerable to abuse, violence, illnesses and diseases.¹

Migration:

Southeast Asia has very active migration trend with huge figures of female migrant labor force, especially from countries such as Philippines and Indonesia that have highest number of out-

¹ Matiaparanam, Braema, "ASEAN Efforts to improve status of women", 2007

migration in the world. It is estimated that there are around 14 million migrant workers from ASEAN Member States, six million of whom have migrated within South-East Asia².

The rich ASEAN countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei are the destination countries within ASEAN. Meanwhile Thailand is both destination and source country. Thai workers go to richer countries like Singapore, Korea, Japan etc. While migrant women from Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos serve their hard labor in Thai garment factories, animal agriculture, domestic work, etc. Reports on forced labor, humans trafficking, slavery has often surfaced in media, especially in the seafood supply chain. Thailand is also ranked low in Trafficking index.

Women migrate abroad to escape unemployment, poverty and have acted as breadwinners for their families back home. They commonly take jobs as domestic workers which is the most common occupation for women, working 18 hours a day, without a day off, without a guaranteed wage, without occupation and safety protection, separated from family and routinely abused. Other occupations are usually in service industry, factories or even as sex workers.

Displacement:

The neo-liberal economic model's push for creation of special economic zones and construction of hydropower dams has created thousands of displacement across Thailand, Myanmar, Lao and Cambodia. Sadly, there hasn't been proper compensations. Activists and communists whose livelihoods depend on Mekong river (that flows through several countries) have been fighting for many years, but with no success.

Human Rights:

ASEAN established its separate Human Rights mechanism called ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). While we note that the AICHR has in past five years contributed towards increased discourse on human rights in ASEAN, we also note that obstacles remain for AICHR in fulfilling its mandate to promote and protect human rights. This includes several limiting provisions in AICHR's terms of reference (TOR). But as widely claimed it is like toothless. This is primarily due to clauses like "Decision-making based on consensus"³ " has in some instances, including the drafting process of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, hindered efforts by AICHR representatives to advance human rights. Along with the non-interference principle, it has also led to a lack of response and action to address gross human rights violation in various ASEAN Member States in the past five years.

² UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, 2013

³ AICHR Terms of Reference, Paragraph 6.1. "Decision-making in the AICHR shall be based on consultation and consensus in accordance with Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter."

AICHR has not been able to address serious and ongoing human rights challenges in the region, for instance: the large refugees crisis of Rohingya ethnicity when ASEAN countries – Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia played ping-pong, driving away refugees into the sea.

Of particular concern is the AICHR's inability to officially receive information on severe human rights situations forwarded by civil society organizations.

At national level, most ASEAN countries do not enjoy human rights freedom and there is fear of persecution. Activism is closely monitored and discouraged, persecuted in all ASEAN countries, except for Philippines and Thailand, which has good civil society movement. Thailand's strict 'Les Majeste' laws and culture of 'non-interference' makes it difficult to voice out in some serious concerns. In countries like Laos, there has been cases of disappearance, for instance- development workers who voiced out against construction of large dams, Mr. Sombath Somphone is still missing.

VAW:

Even after the twenty years since the adoption of Beijing Declaration, there has been little improvement in the elimination of VAW, and ASEAN has unacceptably high rates of violence against women. Two ASEAN countries- Brunei and Myanmar still doesn't have national laws on Domestic violence. Few countries also have laws against marital rape, Thailand being one of them.

ASEAN's human rights mechanism – ASEAN Commission on Promotion and Protection on Rights of Women and Children, came with ASEAN Declaration on Elimination of VAW and elimination of VAC in 2013 and ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on 2014. But these documents are not powerful.

Meanwhile, the irregular nature of women's migration, the unregulated and informal sectors in which women work have added the risks and vulnerabilities of women migrants being trafficked.

Women's Political Participation:

Female representation in Parliament in ASEAN remains below 30%, which is a minimum recommendation by Beijing Platform of Action in 1995, of which all ASEAN countries are signatories. In Thailand, it is only around 10% representation. This shows that although Thailand appears to have modern and open culture, and attitude towards women, patriarchal obstacles still remain in the country, where Thai women are not yet able to exercise decision-making, and/or empowered to participate in political arena.