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WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Making strides, big and small

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee delivered the keynote address at the 14th Apec Women Leaders Network meeting. This is an edited excerpt of her address.



APEC is made up of 21 member economies. The women in these economies should feel lucky to be born in the Asia- Pacific region. Of all the regions in the world, excluding Western Europe, this is where women have done well.

According to the Unifem Annual Report on the Progress of the World's Women, the employment-to-population ratio for women in East Asia and the Pacific is 63 per cent, compared to 54 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 22 per cent in the Middle East and South Asia. An average of 96 per cent of girls in East Asia and the Pacific are enrolled in primary school, compared to 69 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 89 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa.

If you travel around East Asia and the Pacific, you can meet women achieving positions that elude women in the Middle East and Africa. In parts of Afghanistan, engaging in what you and I would see as normal simple day-to-day activities such as going to school or to the hairdresser or beauty salon can be unsafe.

But good as it is to be a woman in Apec, things are not perfect. There is still more to be done for women in Apec economies. For instance, violence against women - in particular, the trafficking of women and girls - remains a problem.

Unicef's Report on the State of the World's Children shows that in some Apec economies, we should try harder to ensure girls attend secondary schools. Actually in many countries, a large number of children, boys as well as girls, drop out after primary school. Indeed, attendance at secondary schools is marginally better among girls than boys.

Women have achieved the most in countries where:

- there is stability and peace;
- the rule of law is established;
- the government is open, accountable and transparent;
- the state emphasises economic and social development, and invests in education and the creation of opportunities for all; and
- globalisation is embraced.

In other words, good governance helps women advance. The more open the country, the deeper the rule of law, the greater the transparency, the more rooted its political and social institutions, the deeper the respect for human rights, the more women can fulfil their lives. So women should strongly support the promotion of good governance.

But just when we think things are going well, we face the global financial and economic crisis. The International Labour Organisation has warned that the crisis could lead to 22 million more unemployed women workers this year.

Women in Asia overwhelmingly work in the export-processing sector, which has been particularly badly hit in the crisis. For example, in Thailand, where fruits are a high-value export, women form 80 per cent of the labour force in that industry. In Malaysia, women form 78 per cent of the workforce in the garment industry, a major export industry in the country. In Cambodia, the garment industry has laid off 30,000 workers. In Vietnam, 65 per cent of the companies dissolved in Ho Chi Minh City last year were textile-garment firms.

But the economic crisis has also presented us with new opportunities. There is compelling evidence that might benefit women in the long run. The Washington Post reported that accounting firm Ernst & Young recently found that companies with more women in senior management roles made more money.

There have been other findings pointing in the same direction. Economists at Davos this year speculated that the presence of more women on Wall Street might have averted the downturn. Pepperdine University did a study that showed that Fortune 500 firms with the best records of putting women in top positions were 18-69 per cent more profitable than the median companies in their industries. McKinsey found the same results for top European companies.

The explanation is that women do not take unnecessary risks. They do well over time. They do not make big money, but they do not lose big money either.

Will this more favourable context help women? What can we do to help ourselves reach for the stars?

What you aspire to depends on where you live and where you sit. When New York Times columnist Tom Friedman asked schoolgirls in Afghanistan what they wanted to be when they grew up, they answered 'teacher', 'doctor'. The girls had met their role models and they aspired to be what they could see.

When Xerox chairman Anne Mulcahy was asked about the gender disparity in corporate America earlier this year, she pointed to the importance of having role models as a 'huge factor in building confidence and aspirations for women in business today'.

Speaking to young women in Singapore, I do not get a sense that they are short of role models. They believe they can be what they want to be. They believe they are entitled to a good education.

They also tell me that they do not feel their employers doubt their intelligence and abilities. Rather, the employers question their commitment to their careers because the assumption is that they will get married and start families.

Society has to change - fast. Employers should not see women taking time off to get married and have children as a deviation from the norm. Society must change out of necessity because of the shortage of manpower and because women are already proving the conventional belief wrong.

Finally, women in politics: Unifem data shows that more women are seeking elected office and more are entering their countries' legislatures. But it is surprising that, in terms of women's participation in politics, progress in the East Asian and Pacific region is not as good as the social progress women have made here.

Only 11 per cent of legislators in East Asia and the Pacific are women. In South Asia, it is 15 per cent, in Latin America and the Caribbean 18 per cent and sub-Saharan Africa 16 per cent. In Singapore, about 20 per cent of our Parliament consists of women and we have one woman minister in a Cabinet of 21.

It is not easy for women to enter politics. They are certainly more closely scrutinised. Their hair, clothing, general looks and age are considered fair targets. Rarely is a man given the same third-degree inspection.