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Asian Women and Decision-making

Chancha Suvannathat

Introduction

Professionals and lay members alike have been preoccupied in recent years with the position and status of women both in the family and society at large. The proclamation of 1975 as Women’s Year and UN Decade for Women (1975-1984) strongly indicated that many essential issues and questions on women had been pointed out and recognized as universal. Some important inequalities questions were raised with regard to existing inequalities as follows:

- Are women of today on a par with men in the workplace?
- Are women’s incomes equal to men’s for a position of comparable responsibility?
- Is there an equal distribution of women throughout the professions?
- Are they equally well represented in institutions of higher learning?
- Do women have an equal say in the workplace as well as in the political and economic spheres?
- Is the so-called modern family truly egalitarian?
- Do mothers who work outside the home for pay receive an equitable share of help from their husbands in terms of child care and household matters?

In short, has gender equality successfully been achieved in the home, the workplace, and in society at large?

The answers to all of the above questions and other similar ones are unfortunately ‘No.’ With respect to women’s participation in the labor force, research findings reported in many national and cross-national studies reveal that there has
been a marked and steady increase in the proportion of women who work for pay. But a more significant pattern observed in a comprehensive cross-national study covering eighteen countries on the changing position of women in family and society was that in all the countries studied, namely the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Ghana, Japan, Finland, Australia, the United States of America, Yugoslavia, Sweden, Switzerland, France, South Africa, Greece, Canada, Norway, Italy, and the Netherlands, the overall increase in female participation in the labor force stemmed primarily from the entry and reentry of married women into the economy. Reports from the U.S.A., France and Canada showed that the proportion of married women entering the labor force had increased twice as fast as it has for all women. A second noteworthy and equally significant emerging pattern was that the largest increase in labor force activity in more recent years had been by young mothers, the group generally viewed as least likely to work outside the home. This new rising trend was observed in all parts of the world.

Thus, the two patterns: the increase in married women and young mothers in the labor force revealed a fundamental change in the role of the female in society—one of tremendous significance and potentially significant ramification. The change distinctly reflected the increasing extent to which women's roles in the family and the workplace are beginning to intersect. However, we must also take into account the complex interrelationships of economic, cultural, and demographic factors in determining women's involvement in the economy. Besides these factors, sexual symmetry in terms of participation in the labor market appeared to be at work. With respect to the Asian context, sexual symmetry in the workplace may also be observed but to a lesser extent compared to women in Western countries. Whether this dramatic shift in the role of women at work has been paralleled by an equally dramatic shift in the role of men within the family remains to be seen. As regards barriers to women's equality, it was noted that the interplay of changes within the population structure has increased the supply of employable women. Furthermore, the market demand for cheap labor has made it much easier for masses of women to enter and reenter the labor force. In addition, with respect to women's level of education, it has been documented that great efforts have been made in many countries around the world to ensure equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls. Even though gender equality has by no means been achieved, the gap between men and women in terms of higher education is presently narrowing everywhere, including Asia.

With an increasing number of women entering the workforce, earning a university degree and undertaking further professional training, one was then obliged
to seriously question, what effect these trends have had on the traditionally uneven distribution of women and men within the occupational structure. Occupation was seen by the majority of people in societies throughout the world as the most important component determining one's status, thus it is through work outside the home that women's status and position—in the larger context of society—might be improved. It was also through work that both men and women could find adequate self-expression and self-realization.

**Women's Participation in Decision-making**

It is generally accepted that participation in public life for women anywhere entails a double burden; existing social structures are thus called upon to handle questions regarding the redefinition and redistribution of roles within the family. Each society has tried its own approach to work out a viable model for development and the division of labor.

In fact women's status, participation, and decision-making in public life are closely related, and it is vital, therefore, that these be considered as the main indicators of societal advancement. The process whereby women make decisions and plan toward a goal or goals will affect not only themselves and/or their own families, but also the community and society at large.

When a woman is in a position of power and involved in the decision-making process, she has the potential to perform well. Unfortunately, not so many women in the Asian region have had the opportunity to occupy such positions. Their potential and the insights they could bring to bear in decision-making are often overlooked, underutilized, and sometimes simply ignored. However, the present promising trend indicates a slow but steady movement toward greater acceptance and the gradual opening up of new positions at work and broader horizons for those women who are able to demonstrate their decision-making abilities.

At the present time, it can be said that Asian women are increasingly being given greater opportunities to express themselves and to make decisions in various domains of public life. Yet, they still have a lot more to learn not only in terms of making more and more decisions but also in terms of improving the qualities of the decision they make, so that they can make detailed provisions for choosing and implementing the most intelligent course of action. This is vital if they are to become valuable human resources dedicated to the advancement of their society.
Collaborative Research on Asian Women’s Involvement in the Decision-making Process together with Key Findings

In 1985, the inception of a collaborative research effort into Asian women’s involvement in the decision-making process in public life was marked by the co-operation of the Regional Unit of Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO, Thailand, which also provided the necessary funding. At the inception of this cross-cultural investigation, four Asian countries, namely Indonesia, India, Malaysia, and Thailand were involved. The collaborative research effort started in May 1985 and was completed in 1986.

In 1987, three research reports in the form of monographs were presented by Indonesia, India, and Thailand (Malaysia was forced to withdraw due to unforeseen circumstances) at a regional meeting of experts on “Women’s participation in decision-making in various aspects of public life” which was held in Bangkok by the Unit of Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO which assumed the role of the co-ordinator for this important research undertaking.

The research project consisted of three phases. The first phase was devoted to the preparation of National Profiles in which data was collected on the demographic features of the country’s female population, their socio-cultural background relative to their status, together with information regarding women’s movements and research on women. In the second phase, a sample survey was conducted with regard to women’s participation in the decision-making process. In the third phase, selected case studies were conducted by the principal researchers by means of interviewing a number of women decision-makers. This type of approach was designed to ensure the comparability of the survey data, and uniformity in the researchers’ presentation. Yet, the differences between the social contexts existing in each of the three countries and in the disciplinary orientations of the researchers did influence the final presentations, and in fact account for some inevitable deviations from the original plan.

An overview of the studies reveals that all the countries participating in the project are undergoing a process of large-scale institutional changes known as modernization. The results of these changes have had both positive and negative effects on various aspects of both urban and rural life.

With regard to participation in the labor force, there were significant differences between the three countries. Thailand, for example, was found to have one of the highest rates of female participation in the labor force. The common ground
shared by the three participating countries appeared to be the fact that the majority of working women were employed in the agricultural sector. In Thailand, the percentage of economically active females has shown a tendency to decline over the last 20 years, mainly due to an increase in the number of women receiving an education. Women in general, however, entered the labor force at an earlier age than their male counterparts.

As the number of working women in the three Asian countries tended to increase, thus indicating a high rate of female participation in the labor force, many new job opportunities opened up for women. They have tended to move away more from their families to work in light industry located in more urbanized areas, and are often subjected to pressures caused by unfair business practices. However, the dynamic changes taking place in the socio-cultural-economic spheres have had varying effects on the role and status of Asian women. A rapid and increasing expansion of educational opportunities for women in these countries, especially access to higher education, could bring about a change in the self-image of women, impart new skills and affect the socialization of future generations.

As for the results of the research survey, the picture that emerged was mixed. As regards the making of decisions, women did in fact participate in different aspects of the decision-making process and to varying degrees. At the personal level of participation, the parents' opinion with regard to further studies for their female offspring was respected more in India than in Indonesia and Thailand. Respondents from the latter two countries gave the answer that they had decided to pursue a course of further education because they thought they were capable of doing so; they also expressed the desire for a good job or better prospects for the future.

With respect to decisions on household matters affecting the family as a whole, the same pattern of results emerged in the three countries. In most cases, married women jointly decided on the purchase of household items, as well as outings and excursions with their spouses. Yet when looking at the results more closely, one discerns the division of labor by sex. That decision was more often made by husbands or other male family members when the purchase of high-priced items was involved. The kind of decisions taken by women in the sampling investigated in both the Thai and Indian studies were mainly routine and of a technical nature. Policy-related decisions were hardly ever taken by these women.

In relation to decisions at the work level, there was one question asking whether the women sampled would accept an offer of a better job which required
more responsibility. The Indian and Indonesian women responded to the question more positively. The Thai respondents, on the other hand, seemed to hesitate to accept such an offer for fear that they would have to bear more responsibility, and would consequently have less time for leisure or for the family. Of the three countries, it may be said that the Thai women sampled were the least career-minded compared with those in the other two countries. However, working women in all the three countries showed a higher degree of job satisfaction. Furthermore, it was also observed that a greater readiness to accept extra responsibilities for job progress, was found in the single women comparing to the married working ones.

With respect to participation in decision-making at the community level, the studies showed a minimal level of participation of women in their community’s activities. Affiliations to clubs and associations were found to be minimal. Even among those who have joined such organizations, their attendance tended to be irregular, indicating the low level of their actual involvement in the activities of the organizations to which they claimed to belong.

As for participation in the decision-making process at the political level, a high voter turnout was found on the part of the women sampled in the three countries. Although they did vote most of the time, the extent of their participation in politics still did not extend beyond voting; they did not, on the whole, become members of the political party for which they voted.

In addition, an attempt was made to study the relationship between exposure, awareness, opinions and the level of participation. The women studied obtained high scores in terms of exposure and opinion, but moderate or lower scores in terms of awareness and still lower on the participation index. The high exposure and opinion scores did not necessarily mean active participation. This was found in all three participating countries.

As for the case studies conducted in the three countries, two main factors--both very similar in nature--were found to affect the decision-making process, namely socialization and education. With particular emphasis on the socialization factor, it was found that the women’s experiences of socialization during the early formative stage of their development, opportunities which allowed them to become gradually more actively involved in the decision-making process, and different types of reinforcement and enrichment they obtained from the key role models or other persons of importance in their lives, all played a significant part in shaping a strong sense of self-determination and direction.


Conclusion

The results obtained from the three main phases of the comparative study complemented one another very well and indicated that Asian women should be treated more as individuals who could contribute a great deal to society on a par with their male counterparts. On the basis of the research results, it was suggested that further opportunities to share experiences and consultative channels be planned in the hope that this would culminate in strategies, both at the national level and for the Asian region as a whole, for improving the situation of low rate of female participation in particular areas. The governments of each country and various agencies concerned were urged to initiate a plan of action to cooperate with one another particularly in assisting women of a lower socio-economic status and to inculcate in women of all socio-economic levels a sense of solidarity and of their own potential. A sincere attitude on the part of the planners would help encourage the conviction that they have both the power and the wisdom to create newer and more equitable kinds of social arrangements. Finally, an awareness among men and women must be fostered from early childhood that it is legitimate for women to engage in all critical areas of decision-making not only for the sake of their own self-development but for the development of the society and nation to which they belong.

References

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