

03/10/2000

Still unequal for women

Dazman Manan

EVEN at the dawn of the new century, women in the Asia-Pacific region still find themselves at a crossroad.

While enormous opportunities await them, formidable obstacles continue to persist in the region's quest for the empowerment of women and gender equality.

Women in poverty, in particular, continue to suffer extreme deprivation and social exclusion.

In this respect, Rural and Island Women: Poverty and Empowerment was the chosen theme at the Second Meeting of the Regional Steering Committee for the Advancement of Rural and Island Women in the Asia Pacific (RSC-AP).

The two-day conference, opened by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and headed by chairperson Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, was attended by 96 delegates comprising first ladies, international organisations' representatives and observers from nine member countries - India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Malaysia.

"The world has 1.5 billion people living on US\$1 a day. Asia is home to some 75 per cent of the world's poor with South Asia accounting for 515 million living under the income poverty line of US\$1 a day," said Thelma Kay, chief of women in development section economic and social commission for Asia and the Pacific.

The vast majority of the poor live in rural Asia, and two-thirds of them are women.

"The gap between women and men in poverty has widened during the past decade with women earning on average slightly more than 50 per cent of what men earn."

Women and men also experience poverty in different ways. "Poverty accentuates gender gaps and makes it all the more difficult to achieve gender equality.

"Unequal access to resources and social opportunities in education, employment and asset ownership make women vulnerable and deny them the options to advance their status."

Kay added that to achieve fairness and equity, policies, programmes and projects should be gender-responsive.

The United Nations General Assembly convened a special session in June with the theme Women: 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century, to take stock of women's condition after the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

It reaffirmed its commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action and found that in spite of commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere, the current economic growth and the process of globalisation have aggravated inequalities suffered by women, deepening their poverty and weakening empowerment.

"Our region still has the highest concentration of poor women in the world. Since gender equality is crucial to women empowerment and poverty eradication, we must mainstream gender in all our activities," said the first lady of India, Usha Narayanan (interview on page 3).

Women, she noted, constitute the best of human resources. "Modern studies affirm that goals of development are best served by investing in women."

Malaysian Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk

Shahrizat Jalil shared her sentiment citing that worldwide, rural and farm women play a major role in agriculture and rural development producing more than 50 per cent of food that is grown.

Yet, these women in developing countries and in countries in transition belong to the most disadvantaged sectors of local populations.

"Since they are among the key players in poverty eradication, the issue of rural women's participation in development especially with regards to their empowerment for power sharing and decision-making positions, require our full attention," said Shahrizat.

She added women are needed in positions of power and decision-making because it is a basic human right enshrined in the principles of democracy.

"Women comprise half the population of a country and have specific roles in society. They have different needs, interests and priorities from men.

"Men could not adequately represent women in decision-making processes and leadership is imperative to ensure that both the agenda of issues to be considered and decisions subsequently made incorporate their views".

As recognised by the Beijing Platform for Action, equal participation of men and women in decision-making and political life is imperative to the advancement of women.

Shahrizat stressed that failure to incorporate women in the economic decision-making processes has posed barriers to the economic advancement of women.

"In agricultural development, policy-makers fail to recognise that women are as much agricultural producers as men and technological changes in agriculture have resulted in the displacement of female labour.

"In the Asia Pacific region, 32 to 46 per cent of the labour force is made up of women. They provide almost 80 per cent of the labour force in the export industries in some countries and where data is available, women-led businesses now account for 23 to 36 per cent of all businesses," she explained.

Despite the advancements, it was found that there are very few countries in the world where the women's share of paid employment in non-agricultural activities is around 50 per cent or more.

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