

Gender inequality continues – at great cost

\$80 billion per year in Asia-Pacific alone

Bangkok – Inequality and discrimination against women costs Asia Pacific economies almost US\$80 billion a year due to restrictions in access to employment and education alone, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), said in its latest *Survey*.

The *Economic and Social Survey for Asia and the Pacific 2007* said the costs were occurring despite considerable gains in reducing discrimination and improving education in recent decades, including in women's life expectancy, lower infant mortality rates, better literacy rates and greater female political participation.

But the *Survey* says many gains are often patchy and uneven across the region with South Asia economies among those likely to benefit the most from reductions in discrimination.

The *Survey* also believes that major changes can be made at little cost, and calls for political commitment to support women and girls in areas as basic as primary education.

But disparities exist over a wide range of areas – from low access to education and health services, to economic opportunities and through to political participation.

In North and Central Asia, South Asia and the Pacific island countries findings show the female-to-male ratio in the population is deteriorating due to women's inadequate access to health services. "In some countries, one in every 10 girls dies before reaching the age of one, one in every 50 women dies during pregnancy and delivery," the *Survey* said.

"Meanwhile, violence against women continues unabated," indicating the impact of a lack of empowerment of women in many households.

"Blocking the access of women and girls to education and health is detrimental to human capital development and labour force participation, and thus to individual welfare and economic growth," the *Survey* said.

Restrictions to women's access to employment opportunities cost the region US\$42-47 billion a year. A further US\$16-30 billion is lost through gender gaps in education. "These are just the economic costs – added to them are social and personal costs," the *Survey* said.

"Gender discrimination in the region is most visible in the low access women and girls have to education and health services, to economic opportunities and to political participation," the *Survey* said.

Across the region female primary school enrolment can be as much as 26% lower than that of males. This has significant implications in terms of productivity as well as women's health by imposing additional economic costs, both direct and indirect, the *Survey* says.

The spill over costs include higher service charges for drugs and transport, loss of income and education during times of illness, lower productivity – reducing income and output.

An indirect impact spill over is to children's health, as mothers with lower education and lower incomes are unable to provide adequately for their children. It also means a smaller labour force as life expectancies are cut short.

The *Survey* warns of deterioration in female-to-male ratios especially in North and Central Asia, South Asia and the Pacific islands.

Improving women's participation together with the expected increase in employment would lift output and growth across the region.

"Increased employment could boost production, especially in labour intensive sectors," the *Survey* says. The spill over is higher income from new employment that would stimulate consumption and demand. "The greatest effects would be felt where female labour force participation is currently lowest: in India, Malaysia and Indonesia," it said.

If female participation was placed on a par with United States, India's gross domestic product (GDP) would be lifted by 4.2% a year and growth would be lifted by 1.08 percentage points – a gain to the economy of US\$19 billion.

Significant gains could also be achieved in Malaysia and Indonesia, but less so for countries, such as China, where female labour force participation is already higher.

The *Survey* points to significant gains from educating women. "Greater access to education and labour force participation will lower child mortality and under-nutrition and increase education for the next generation," the *Survey* says. But failure to close gender gaps in education amount to added costs of up to \$30 billion a year.

Education also benefits women to better protect themselves from the threat of HIV/AIDS. Women's disempowerment means they are unable to force partners to use condoms, as well as the risks associated with the threat from HIV/AIDS.

"The key role of the mother in household affairs – particularly in children's health and education – means that her education and aspirations can shape a stimulating home," the *Survey* notes.

The social costs of gender inequality also arise in cases of domestic violence. Such violence often has a long lasting psychological impact, together with a lowering of women's self-esteem, productivity and wages and destroying marriages – "with all the costs that children ultimately pay."

Other social costs are seen in the fact that a million Asian children, mostly girls between 5 and 15 are "lured or forced to work in the commercial sex market every year."

The *Survey* calls for a range of recommendations to enable the region to benefit economically from the elimination of gender discrimination.

The recommendations include better access to education through free primary education as well as scholarships to girls. Also called for are better access to health care that may include initiatives that range from mobile clinics to the promotion of pro-poor growth policies to address malnutrition, and encourage condom use to prevent HIV/AIDS.

As the region's oldest and most comprehensive annual review of economic and social developments, UNESCAP's *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific* provides the only independent source of analysis covering all countries in this vast and diverse region, and considers both the social and economic spheres of development. The *2007 Survey*, entitled "Surging Ahead in Uncertain Times," looks at the most critical issues, challenges and risks our region faces in the months ahead.

Headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand, UNESCAP is the largest of the UN's five Regional Commissions in terms of membership, population served and area covered. The only inter-governmental forum covering the entire Asia-Pacific region, it aims to promote economic and social progress. ■