The Big Choices for Asia in the Decades Ahead

Who can say what Asia might look like in 20 years’ time? No one with any real degree of certainty, but the events and trends of today give pointers. North Korea’s continuing nuclearization, military build-ups around the region, Japan’s probing constitutional reforms, swelling mega-cities and shifting demographics across Asia — all are examples of changes under way that will see a dramatically different Asia in coming decades.
IN RECENT DECADES, globalization and regionalization have sharply changed gender relations in Asian communities. Numerous conferences and exchanges have built global networks and facilitated mutual learning and interaction. These growing networks have sought to root out gender discrimination on a global scale. In addition, the global norms of women’s human rights have urged individual countries to adopt gender equality policies and other measures pursued by movements of women.

Since the 1990s, the South Korean women’s movement has succeeded in enacting several special laws including the Act on the Punishment of Sexual Crimes and Protection of Victims, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, and the Sex Trafficking Prevention Act, as well as formally abolishing the patriarchal family *hoju* system in South Korea. The three laws mentioned above also helped raise social awareness about violence against women in South Korean society.

In 1995, South Korea enacted the Framework Act on Women’s Development to facilitate gender equality and promote the social status of women in areas ranging from politics and the economy to social and cultural arenas. A major thrust of the framework act was to help women get out of poverty and push for gender mainstreaming. It was a by-product of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995, and was replaced by the Framework Act on Gender Equality in 2014. The 2014 act defines gender equality as “being equally guaranteed human rights without being hampered by any form of discrimination, bias, depreciation and violence.
based upon gender as well as being allowed to participate in all areas and be treated equally in doing so” (Article 3, Clause 1).

These laws helped form the legal basis for gender equality in South Korea. In practice, however, strong patriarchal discrimination is still present in many aspects of life including job opportunities, wages, promotions and the responsibility to care for an aging society. As seen in issues of social control over sexuality and the appearance of women, as well as a male-oriented family succession system, a strong patriarchal gender stereotype still prevails in Korean society.

South Korea was ranked 17th among the 34 OECD member countries in the 2015 Human Development Index, and it ranked 104th out of 161 countries in the Gender Development Index, which takes gender ratio into account. This is because the gender gap has widened between women and men at US$21,898 and US$46,018, respectively (UNDP). South Korea also ranked poorly in the 2015 Gender Gap Index, coming 115th out of 145 countries surveyed. In particular, it ranked 125th in labor force participation and opportunity, far behind other Asian countries such as Singapore (9th), the Philippines (16th) and Thailand (19th), and among China (81st), Japan (106th), Indonesia (114th), Bangladesh (130th) and India (139th). Life expectancy and literacy rates for women in comparison to men ranked first, with the average monthly wage for women was just 62.5 percent of that for men. The career interruption rate among married women reached 21.8 percent and the labor force participation rate for women in their 30s who were in a period of childbirth and/or child-rearing was 58.8 percent, while married women spent 4.5 times longer on housekeeping work than their male counterparts. Although among the population aged 65 and above women account for 68.1 per 100 people, the proportion of women who joined the national pension scheme was just 42.9 percent. The proportion management positions at public institutions filled by women is 11.6 percent and of female district representatives in the national assembly is 10.3 percent. The proportion of women among senior public servants and university faculties is 11.6 percent and 24.4 percent, respectively (KWDI, GSIS). In other words, women earn less than men and their access to better jobs is limited while they are faced with a weak social security safety net and spend much time on child-rearing and domestic labor. Although feminism has long sought to promote the value of women’s labor, dealing with the dual burdens of work and family, has turned out to be very slow and extremely difficult.

IT TAKES MORE THAN JUST CONVENTIONS AND STATEMENTS

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the next 15 years. They include 17 goals and 169 targets to develop a global society that all countries and civil societies will strive toward. Goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment, has been lauded as a major step forward in making women’s issues “a standalone goal which gives prominence to women’s issues as opposed to considering it as a cross-cutting issue as has been done in the past” (Abelenda, 2015). Goal 5 includes ending discrimination toward women, abolishing violence toward women such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation, ending child marriage and female genital mutilation, mitigating unpaid care work, guaranteeing equal economic and political participation and upholding reproductive rights and women’s health (see box).

The enunciation and adoption of these goals is the fruit of 40 years of discussion by the international community and women’s rights groups through the World Conference of the International Women’s Year (1975), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the 20-year Program of Action (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (1995), Millennium Development Goal 3 (2000) and Beijing+20 (2015). However, it remains to be seen whether women’s empowerment toward gender equality can be achieved by 2030. In fact, it might be better to call it impossible. Not only are the root causes of women’s issues too old, the problem is
Issues that women face as women sometimes seem unsolvable. Sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, honor killings and forced marriage, poverty, gender discrimination and women’s lack of empowerment are urgent problems that need to be addressed.

Still present in various parts of the world, poverty, discrimination and violence against women are becoming ever more serious.

For instance, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that solving the gender wage gap will take 70 more years. The average gender wage gap globally was reported as 23 percent, in other words women earn only 77 percent of what men earn for equal work. Women were also reported to work longer hours doing both paid and unpaid work compared to men. Regardless of the context of rich or poor countries, the time spent by women in domestic labor and care is 2.5 times more than that of men.

Female employed labor amounts to only 40 percent of the total labor force, but out of that percentage part time work accounts for 57 percent. Females account for 65 percent of the retired population, but their pensions are on average lower than those of men by 10.6 percent. This gap occurs regardless of women’s level of education or age. The universal occurrence of this problem notwithstanding, national economic development levels imply that gender equality is important in any society.

MITIGATING REAL-LIFE HARDSHIP

Gender inequality is already an international problem addressed through various international norms. At the same time, it is also an issue that differs by region and country. For instance, human trafficking, including sexual exploitation, is one of the biggest issues of globalization. This is especially true for Asia, because female labor migration, forced marriage and human trafficking are on the rise due to differences in economic development among countries in the region.

While each country is striving to take anti-trafficking measures, they cannot solve the interest of women emigrating for survival. Universal human rights declarations cannot eliminate the hardships of women locally. Women want to emigrate safely rather than having their movement hindered by human rights violations. Therefore, the efforts of countries that focus on prosecution and saving victims during the process of immigration do not have much beneficial effect. The interest of each country to prevent illegal immigration is given greater priority than guaranteeing safe and dignified work and emigration rights. The deeper problem is persistent poverty in Asian countries where political instability and other issues threaten personal security.

For the women themselves, the lines are blurred between human trafficking for prostitution, voluntary emigration and international marriage via brokers. Therefore, to combat problems in the immigration of women and human trafficking, there should be a focus not just on international norms, but also on legal and social efforts to enable safe immigration and preserve the rights of immigrants as individuals.

Since 2012, we have met more than 200 young women activists from 40 Asian countries who are working in various NGOs on women’s rights and empowerment issues through the Ewha Global Empowerment Program at the Asian Center for Women’s Studies at Ewha Womans University.

While we cannot list all the issues faced by girls and women in each country, they do not stray far from the scope proposed by SDG Goal 5. Research in Asian countries finds that women’s participation in the political and economic sphere is still poor compared to that of men. Moreover, women’s authority in decision-making processes remains low. Research shows that many women work largely for survival while taking responsibility for care work within the family.

However, issues that women face as women sometimes seem to be unsolvable. Sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, honor killings and forced marriage, poverty, gender discrimination and women’s lack of empowerment are urgent problems that need to be addressed.

Some of the country-specific issues raised by female Asian activists are listed in a panel story on pages 69 and 71.

CULTURAL GENDER WARS EMERGING

Many countries in Asia, including South Korea, have taken part in international campaigns and implemented policies on gender equality. South Korea was the first country in Asia to establish a women’s studies program in 1977, and the women’s movement played a key role during the democratization process in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the feminist movement contributed significantly to shaping laws regarding women.

Throughout this process, the feminist movement in South Korea was widely recognized and became a significant reference point for other Asian women’s organizations and women’s studies efforts by universities. However, in the neoliberal era of the 2000s, the women’s movement began to lose meaning for young women activists.

Instead, working for non-governmental organizations became a job in itself — and unfortunately one that was poorly paid. On the other hand, after gender mainstreaming the field of gender is also becoming a professional expertise in the job market.

Professor Siumi Maria Tam from Hong Kong University claims that gender equality policies in Hong Kong have lacked real-world depth. “There has been more acceptance of gender equality in Hong Kong, but mostly as an abstract concept. In fact, there is a lot of backlash, and one sees the problem of gender inequality being subtly and structurally ingrained” (personal email, September 2016). Professor Saskia Wieringa, an expert on Indonesia among other places, sees politics becoming more conservative and detrimental to women. “There is now a conservative Islamist trend pushing women back into family. Culture wars will intensify in Asia as geopolitical tensions increase. Women will fight more and more against sexual and other forms of violence. Sexual and other minorities will fight for their rights” (personal email, September 2016).

The advent of a neoliberal, market-driven society in Asia also has created a political and economic environment in which men and women are differently affected. Even female gender
depending on class, ethnicity and generation causes different exchange values in the labor market. Peking University Professor Dai Jinghua’s analysis of Sun Zhour’s film, Pretty Mom (Breaking the Silence), argues that poverty issues driven by urban single mothers have been replaced by gender issues. Subject matters such as social polarization, youth unemployment and aged societies are also being represented by gender politics, thereby hiding social issues and transforming them into gender issues of family, marriage or love. This evidently shows that gender issues are considered less political in Asian societies than other social problems because the problem is seen as relevant specifically to women. As social issues are replaced by gender issues, women are sometimes unfairly blamed for being selfish and neglecting traditional gender roles. The spike in the level of female education and increase in female employment have led to the growing phenomenon of marrying late or living alone in Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and others that have experienced strong economic growth. The average age of a first marriage for women in South Korea is 29.8, three years later than it was in 2001. Women in South Korea born after 1990 have experienced gender equality and therefore consider women’s rights to be natural. As a result, sexual violence, harassment and discrimination against women in the workplace enrage young university-educated women. Meanwhile, men who are also struggling in this neoliberal, market-driven society believe women are selfish and too individualistic. These men perceive that young women who are enjoying higher status due to gender equality are at the same time reaping benefits from the traditional “ladies first” norms of the patriarchal system. Such logic sees these young men enraged by a sense of unfairness. Men suffering in this neoliberal setting may see young, educated, middle-class women in urban areas as objects of competition, hate and violence, as women who are stealing previously “male” jobs and rights. From this perspective, the phenomenon of educated middle-class Asian women making greater achievements than in the past results from a combination of women’s self-ishness and a social support system for them as the social minority, and is something with which many young men cannot agree.

EMPOWERING YOUNG ASIAN FEMINISTS FOR THE FUTURE

Gender issues in Asia have received significant attention in two different ways. The first discourse relates to Asia’s remarkable economic growth, which is starting to slow. With slower economic growth and limited human resources, there is a need to attract more women into the workplace. In other words, women who were not encouraged to join the labor force under the patriarchal society must now participate in order to maintain economic growth.9 The second discourse concerns the cultural meaning of Asian women’s femininity, which has been compared with the assertiveness and individualism of women in the West and explained negatively as Asian women being the victims of patriarchal cultures and prioritizing their family or community ahead of their personal desires. This explains how the norms of patriarchal society can influence women to consider taking on the role of mother or wife as the most important part of their identity, rather than exercising their rights and freedoms as individuals. However, the negative images of “passive and sacrificial Asian women” in the past has been challenged by a more positive analysis that sees the femininity of Asian women as helping build societies dedicated to family or community, unlike more atomized Western societies.

Country-specific Issues Faced by Women and Girls

Afghanistan
87 percent female illiteracy; need consent from husband or father to study or work; not allowed to go out alone; lack health services; high maternal mortality (600 people per 100,000 births); high teenage birth rates (86.8 per 1,000); child marriage under age 13; forced marriage; domestic violence; female runaways punished; urgent to include gender and human rights perspectives in building civil society; government structure and legislation; the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.

Bangladesh
87 percent of women have experienced violence; inadequate legal protection on domestic violence, sexual violence and child violence; rapid increase of sexual harassment in universities; criticism of female victims; sexual violence against native women (VAW); female migrant labor accounts for 57 percent of the world total; infanticide; dowry requirements; polygamy; honor killings; acid attacks; 66 percent early marriage rate for women under 18; 22 percent experience pregnancy before 15; teenage birth rate at 80.6 persons, the highest after Afghanistan; threats to female health; discrimination in employment due to lack of education; female labor rights violations in clothing factories and the cigarette industry; overwork and low wages.

Cambodia
Gender division for occupational categories; low female participation in decision-making positions in legislative and executive branches; Chabab Srey code for women only passively present in school; legislation enactment related to gender-based violence (GBV); discrimination against female workers in clothing factories; child sexual exploitation; immigration and human trafficking; stigma against survivors of rape during war; restrictions on secondary and higher education for women; public health; the necessity of advancing female economic authority.

China
High illiteracy rates among women in urban areas; gender gap in level of education; 24.7 percent of women experience domestic violence; elder abuse; poor labor conditions for female workers migrating to cities; rape; sexual harassment; preference for male offspring; forced abortion; sterilization; wealth inequality between urban and rural areas; increase in the number of women in poverty; lower wages for women doing the same work as men; oppression of LGBT activities; sexual objectification.

India
Crimes against the female gender committed every three minutes; violence against women committed every 15 minutes, rape every 29 minutes, sexual violence every 53 minutes, women burned due to dowry issues every 93 minutes; domestic violence; sexual violence; honor killings; female feticide; infanticide; marriage rates of under-18s are at 41 percent; child trafficking; discrimination against sexual minorities; severe destitution for 78 percent of Dalit women; poverty; illiteracy; poor drinking water for women; threats to reproductive health; demands for action on sexual violence after the New Delhi gang rape case; no guarantee of sexual autonomy rights or right to choose spouse; high maternal mortality ratio (190 deaths per 100,000 births).

Indonesia
Violence against women in disputed areas; discrimination against LGBT individuals; poor labor rights on palm oil plantations; suspension of female education due to early marriage; child trafficking; child labor; prostitution; abuse of female immigrants; stateless children; high maternal mortality ratio (190 deaths per 100,000 births); reproductive health rights for teenage girls; seed campaign for farmers; national-scale regulation on female sexuality; implementation of anti-pornography law; quota system limiting female politicians to 30 percent; religious clashes and gender perspective.
However, feminists who are witnessing young feminist movements in Asia these days find the emergence of new forms of feminism and gender politics among a young generation of women fascinating. In fact, the radical young feminists captured by the phrase “I am a feminist” in this decade behave quite differently from the ways that older feminists who came from universities, social movements of democratization and community development programs in Asia have done. Feminism in the younger generation is based on a strong awareness that women must have equal rights to men in reality, not just in law. In order to achieve equal rights they have to challenge patriarchal cultural practices and ideologies strongly embedded in marriage, family and religions.

In reality, Asian women often remain subjects of sexual violence and hate crimes, as well as being responsible for the care-giving work that maintains family and society. Simultaneously, women are demanding the social rights and power to prevent discrimination due to class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality. They demand to exercise individual rights and identity and secure their dignity within the norms of tradition, religion and nationalism.

To hold on to insights about 21st century gender discrimination, it is necessary for women to link discrimination against women to other forms of discrimination, and to connect international women’s rights and regional activism to eliminate such practices. Chinese feminist journalist Cai Yiping advocates that communications and studying differences in terms of generations, nations, classes, ethnicities are needed. Information and communications technology have fostered remarkable trans-national and trans-local networking and solidarities. Information across borders and campaigns or organizing strategies of movements are easily learned or appropriated through either supra-national or trans-national networks. In this process young feminists have made great progress in challenging the cultural practices of oppressive patriarchal norms. Gender equality cannot be achieved only through gender politics. As such, young feminists are recognizing the need to integrate the agenda for women into the agendas of cities, nations, labor, development, poverty and so on. It is also necessary for them to learn about how the intersecting factors of inequality operate.

Young women in Asia are able to recognize the importance of policy strategies that can bring changes to women’s lives — but more importantly, they are aware that their own cultural competence and solidarity in changing their lives and society are critical. This is what our EGEP and the programs of our Asian colleagues are doing now. Now is the time for us to pay attention to these women, especially young feminists and their trans-national activisms in Asia as agents of change in global society.

Eun-Shil Kim is a Professor in the Department of Women’s Studies and Director of the Korean Women’s Institute, and Director in the Asian Center for Women’s Studies at Ewha Womans University. Jeun Roh is a senior research coordinator at the Asian Center for Women’s Studies and has been involved in various international academic networking, education and publication projects at Ewha Womans University since 2002.

This article was translated from Korean into English by Sookyung Cho, a Program Officer of the APLN Secretariat at the East Asia Foundation and Dong Eun Lee, a Global Asia Fellow at the East Asia Foundation.

Laos
Limited gender roles for women (housewives and family farming); high female illiteracy; low levels of higher education; violence against women; early marriage.

Malaysia
Islamic family laws; spread of conservative interpretation of Islam; gender role stereotyping; child-raising issues for female workers; division of gender for occupational categories; only 2.5 percent of managerial positions held by women; female immigration.

Mongolia
Highest rate of families with female household heads, at 21.5 percent; 88 percent of human trafficking victims are women; increased violence against women and children; National Program to Combat Domestic Violence; alcoholism; appearance-oriented consumption; low political participation and low rates of holding decision-making positions despite 75 percent of university students being women; less than 10 percent of female candidates elected; increase the labor of traditional female nomads.

Myanmar
Sexual abuse and human trafficking in immigrant labor; violence against women in refugee camps; exclusion of women in decision-making areas such as the national assembly; division of labor by gender; birth limitation health law oppressing ethnic minorities; PTSD of women in conflict areas; natural disasters; limited female participation in medical field; domestic violence; empowerment of women through advancement in ICT services.

Nepal
Over 50 percent female illiteracy; 64 percent of women experience domestic violence; child marriage; dowry requirements; discrimination against widows and single women; human trafficking and forced prostitution of girls; sexual harassment and rape in public spaces; dual burden of labor for women living in rural areas; custom of isolation during menstruation (Chaupadhi Pratha); uterine prolapse; women believe their health is life’s lowest priority; caste and gender discrimination against Dalit women; discrimination against sexual minorities; weak responses to natural disasters; increase of female immigrant laborers; almost no active female political leaders despite 33 percent of members of 31 political parties are women.

Pakistan
The first Islamic country to have a female prime minister; guarantee of women’s right to vote; the third most dangerous country in the world for women; rape cases occur every three hours; rape is dealt with on the same level as adultery; a female witness is recognized as worth only half of a male witness in court; housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities; early marriage; forced marriage; honor killing; acid attacks; human trafficking; dowry requirements; no right to choose spouse; women commonly have 10 to 12 children; polygamy; more than 80 percent of women have experienced domestic violence; the nose of a woman suspected of extramarital affairs is cut off; the Control and Acid Prevention Act; the Sexual Harassment at the Work Place Act; the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act.

The Philippines
High maternal mortality ratio of women in poverty; teenage birth rate; unwanted pregnancy; abortion is illegal; labor exploitation and sexual abuse of immigrants working in housekeeping; restrictions on marriage immigration; rights of native women and sexual minorities; generational conflict in feminist campaigns.

South Korea
Anti-sexual violence; rights to a new family composition; legalization of LGBT; peace and environmental campaigns; food sovereignty; security; gender sensitivity.

Vietnam
Limitation of gender equality law; concentration in unskilled labor among female workers; high illiteracy among women in poverty; education gap between urban and rural areas for women; traditional gender norms; Little say within family due to Confucianism; preference for male offspring; human trafficking; issues of reproductive health; domestic violence; HIV/AIDS stigma.