



# ASIA - PACIFIC & POPULATION POLICY

## Women are Key Players in the Economies of East and Southeast Asia

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy summarizes research on population and reproductive health for policymakers and others concerned with the Asia-Pacific region.

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Despite recent financial turmoil in East and Southeast Asia, few would question the region's economic success over the past 40 years. Throughout this period, as gender differences in economic activity have diminished, Asian women have played an increasingly important role in economic growth.

How did women help create Asia's "economic miracle," and how have their lives changed as a result? What problems do they face today, and what problems are they likely to face in the future? Based on an international study of six East and Southeast Asian economies, this issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* discusses women's changing marriage and childbearing patterns, educational attainment, and labor-force participation. The discussion also touches on changes in family life and implications for government policy.

tion of women to economic growth as well as the effects of population and economic changes on women's lives. Scholars presented and discussed their results at a conference held in Honolulu in January 1997. These results are currently available in the Program on Population's Working Paper series and will be published in an edited volume.

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### MARRIAGE AND CHILDBEARING

### ABOUT THE STUDY

The East-West Center's Program on Population initiated a comprehensive project in 1996 to investigate the links between Asian population change and economic growth. American and Asian scholars compared the salient features of demographic and economic change in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia. Several of these studies examined the contribu-

East and Southeast Asian women are postponing marriage and planning their families to a much greater extent than was true 30 years ago. In 1960, nearly all women in the six countries covered by the study married before they turned 30. Between 1960 and 1990, however, the proportion of women age 25-29 who were married dropped from 95 to 69 percent in Taiwan, from 95 to 78 percent in South Korea, and from 78 to 60 percent in Japan. Smaller but similar

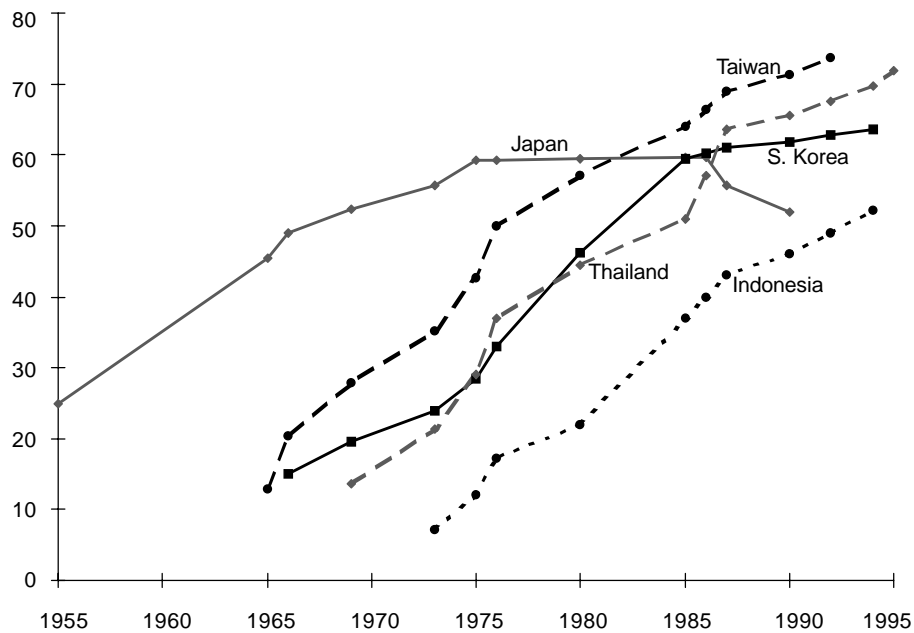


Figure 1 Percentage of married women of reproductive age using modern contraceptive methods: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1955–95

Source: Tsui 1997.

declines occurred in other countries of the region—from 87 to 75 percent in Thailand and from 96 to 89 percent in Indonesia.

When women from these countries do marry, they have fewer children than in the past. In one generation, women have reduced their average lifetime childbearing from around six children to two or fewer. Delays in marriage have accounted for some of this dramatic

drop in childbearing, but the most important factor has been married women's overwhelming acceptance of modern contraception. In the countries covered by the study, more than half of married women of reproductive age now use a modern contraceptive method. The most recent prevalence rates for modern contraceptives range from 52 percent in Indonesia to 74 percent in Taiwan (Figure 1).

Table 1 Percentage of women age 12–17 enrolled in secondary school: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1960–90

| Percentage enrolled | Japan | Taiwan | S. Korea | Singapore       | Thailand | Indonesia       |
|---------------------|-------|--------|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|
| 1960                | 73    | 21     | 14       | 26              | 6        | 3               |
| 1970                | 86    | 45     | 34       | 45              | 14       | 11              |
| 1980                | 94    | 80     | 71       | 59              | 28       | 23              |
| 1990                | 98    | 97     | 87       | 71 <sup>a</sup> | 32       | 39 <sup>b</sup> |

<sup>a</sup>Value for 1989.

<sup>b</sup>Value for 1992.

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical yearbook*, various years; Executive Yuan, *Statistical yearbook of the Republic of China*, various years.

## EDUCATION AND LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Women's enrollment in secondary school has increased dramatically since the 1960s (Table 1), and the traditional gender gap in secondary school enrollment has largely disappeared. Women's university enrollment is also rising, but in most countries of the region women are still disadvantaged at the university level. In South Korea, for example, women are only half as likely to enter university as men.

Women have accounted for steadily increasing proportions of total labor force growth (Figure 2). In most countries, the number of working women has grown much more rapidly than the number of working men. Indeed, some have argued that the labor-intensive, export-led industrialization drives in Asia would not have been possible without the participation of women.

With economic development, the occupational composition of female employment has changed. The most dramatic changes have been the drop in agricultural employment and the rise in clerical positions. In Japan, for example, the proportion of working women engaged in agriculture declined from 43 percent in 1960 to only 8 percent in 1990 (Table 2). Over the same period, the proportion engaged in clerical work rose from 10 percent to 30 percent. While the proportion of working women who hold professional, technical, and administrative positions has increased in recent decades, it is still quite low. Between 1960 and 1990, the proportion of working women holding such relatively well-paid positions rose from 5 to 13 percent in Japan and from 1 to 4 percent in Thailand.

Within the manufacturing sector, women have been heavily concentrated in low-wage, labor-intensive industries. In 1989, wages for Japanese women em-

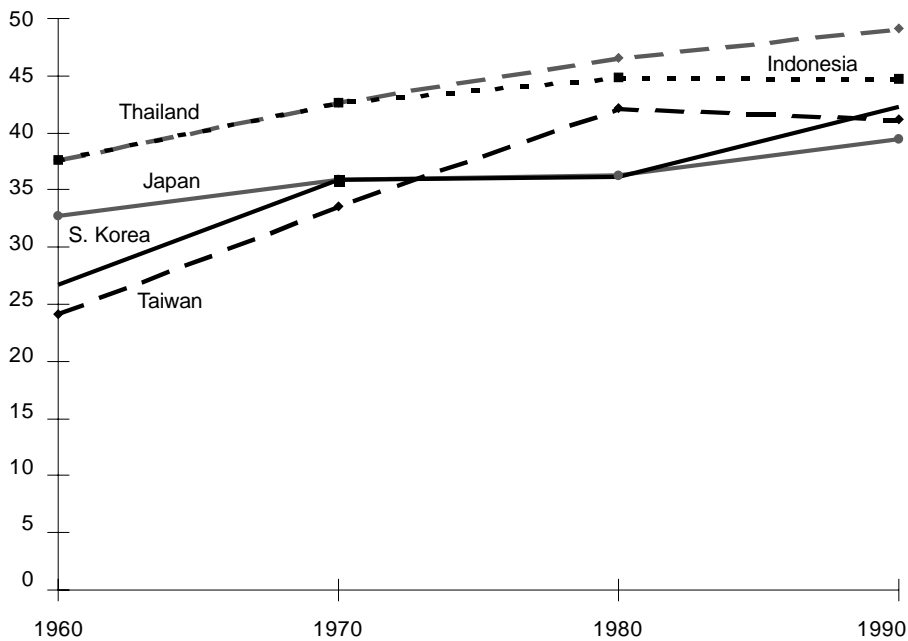


Figure 2 Women's share in total manufacturing employment: Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, 1960–90

Source: Bauer 1977.

employed in manufacturing were on average 42 percent of the wages for men. In South Korea, women in manufacturing earned 51 percent of men's wages; in Singapore, women's wages were 58 percent of men's. The wage gap is narrowing in some countries, but there is no consistent trend.

During the industrial restructuring of the 1980s, women also suffered disproportionately from losses in manufacturing jobs. In Taiwan, for example, manufacturing employment declined by 364,000 jobs between 1987 and 1990, and 58 percent of the workers who lost their jobs were women. The question arises whether women will be similarly disadvantaged during the economic readjustment that is taking place today.

## BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY LIFE

Studies in South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia show a clear inverse relationship between women's labor force par-

ticipation and responsibilities for childcare. The predicted probability that a South Korean woman in her late 20s or early 30s will participate in the labor market declines from 54 percent if she has no children, to 40 percent if she has one child, and to 28 percent if she has two children.

Although this pattern persists in many countries, a tendency is starting to emerge for women to remain in the labor force as they marry and raise their families. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of Japanese women who left their jobs because of marriage or pregnancy declined by 33 percent. Over the same 15-year period, the proportion of employed Japanese women with 10 or more years of continuous service increased from 14 to 25 percent. This is an important trend in a region where wages and promotions are often based on seniority.

An obvious problem for working women is the dual burden of employment and housework. In general, husbands in Asia are not much help around the house.

According to a 1990 survey in South Korea, married women spent on average more than 5 hours a day on household chores and childcare, while men spent an average of 37 minutes. A 1986 survey in Japan showed that married women with jobs spent 2 hours and 26 minutes a day on household chores, on average, while married men spent 7 minutes.

Another constraint for working mothers, at least in some countries, is a shortage of options for childcare. A 1991 survey in Seoul, Korea, showed that only 8 percent of working women with children under age 10 used childcare facilities. Thirty-nine percent relied on their parents or other relatives for childcare, and 39 percent left their children at home alone.

As the survey in Seoul indicates, some married women are able to share the burden of housekeeping and childcare with the older generation. A trend toward increasing independent living among the elderly appears to have been offset to a substantial degree by a general rise in life expectancy. Many more children in Asia today have living grandparents than children had in the past. In Japan and Taiwan, for example, nearly 30 percent of all children age 0–14 live in three-generation households.

Although data are sparse, live-in grandparents are likely to make an important contribution to childcare, household chores, and family financial resources. With the growth of the elderly population, however, middle-aged women who have finished rearing their children may increasingly be forced to withdraw from the labor market to care for elderly relatives.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The studies reported here provide clear evidence of women's singular contribution to economic growth in Asia. In five

**Table 2** Percentage of employed women by occupational category: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1960–90

|                                | Agriculture | Clerical | Manufacturing | Sales/service | Professional/technical/<br>administrative |
|--------------------------------|-------------|----------|---------------|---------------|---|
| <b>Japan</b>                   |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1960                           | 43          | 10       | 21            | 21            | 5   |
| 1970                           | 26          | 18       | 25            | 24            | 7   |
| 1980                           | 14          | 24       | 25            | 27            | 11  |
| 1990                           | 8           | 30       | 24            | 25            | 13  |
| <b>Taiwan<sup>a</sup></b>      |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1980                           | 18          | 17       | 38            | 21            | 6   |
| 1990                           | 10          | 23       | 31            | 27            | 9   |
| <b>South Korea<sup>a</sup></b> |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1970                           | 60          | 3        | 15            | 20            | 0   |
| 1980                           | 46          | 9        | 20            | 22            | 4   |
| 1990                           | 27          | 16       | 21            | 28            | 9   |
| <b>Singapore</b>               |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1957                           | 12          | 6        | 25            | 45            | 10  |
| 1970                           | 3           | 17       | 31            | 34            | 15  |
| 1980                           | 1           | 27       | 35            | 24            | 12  |
| 1990                           | 0           | 27       | 26            | 29            | 16  |
| <b>Thailand</b>                |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1960                           | 86          | 0        | 4             | 8             | 1   |
| 1970                           | 84          | 1        | 5             | 9             | 2   |
| 1980                           | 73          | 1        | 8             | 11            | 3   |
| 1990                           | 47          | 3        | 16            | 25            | 4   |
| <b>Indonesia<sup>a</sup></b>   |             |          |               |               |   |
| 1971                           | 58          | 1        | 1             | 18            | 2   |
| 1980                           | 52          | 2        | 14            | 26            | 3   |
| 1990                           | 47          | 29       | 16            | 25            | 4   |

<sup>a</sup>Comparable data for earlier years not available.

Sources: United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook*, 1964, 1973, 1984, 1994. International Labor Organization, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*, 1985, 1991, 1994. International Labor Organization, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics, Retrospective Edition on Population Census 1945–89*. Republic of China, *Yearbook of Manpower Survey Statistics, Taiwan Area*, 1991. Government of Indonesia, *1971 Population Census of Indonesia*.

of the countries covered by the study, the number of women in the labor force has grown substantially over the past 30 years. The only exception is Thailand, where women's labor force participation was high at the outset and has remained high. With dramatic improvements in secondary-level and university education, women in East and South-

east Asia today are in a better position than ever to contribute to the region's economic success.

Policies and programs that remove barriers to women's participation in the labor force make good economic sense. One problem that needs to be addressed is employer discrimination against married women. In South Korea, for ex-

ample, women have often been forced to quit their jobs when they marry. Wage discrimination is another serious problem.

The trend toward late marriage, while benefiting women in many ways, has also created significant social problems. Single young women leave their families in the countryside and migrate to cities to take jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors. According to a 1992 survey, 30 percent of young women working in South Korea's manufacturing sector have engaged in premarital sex. Few have benefited from sex education classes or reproductive health services.

For married women who wish to continue their careers, the general lack of childcare facilities poses a problem. As the population in Asia ages, the low level of institutional care available for the elderly is also likely to create problems for middle-aged women who bear the primary responsibility for the care of elderly parents and parents-in-law.

## FURTHER READING

The East-West Center's Program on Population has published preliminary results from the project on population change and economic growth as a series of Working Papers. This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* is based primarily on papers in the series by John Bauer (No. 88-10), Griffith Feeney and Andrew Mason (No. 88-2, in preparation), Dennis Ahlburg and Eric Jensen (No. 88-3), Amy Ong Tsui (No. 88-18), Mathana Phananimamai (No. 88-11), and Kwon Tai-Hwan (No. 88-20). These Working Papers are available from the Program on Population.