



Review

UN goals on gender equality far from met

Noeleen Heyzer, For The Straits Times

895 words

19 October 2011

Straits Times

STIMES

English

(c) 2011 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

AT SOME point this month, a child will be born and the world's population will have reached seven billion. There is a good chance that this childbirth will take place in the Asia-Pacific region, home to 61 per cent of the world's population.

If the child is born in the Asia-Pacific region, it will most likely be a boy: Last year, among children below the age of five, there were 110 boys for every 100 girls. This is much higher than the natural sex ratio, and higher than in any other region of the world.

This shift away from the natural sex ratio indicates that prevailing family structures, culture, policy incentives and available technology combine to make parents in some countries prefer boys over girls and act on that preference. The trend is alarming, reflecting existing social practices of gender discrimination, neglect, and undervaluation of girls.

The newly released Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission (Escap) tells the story.

The seven billionth child has a better chance than a decade ago of surviving past the age of five, and is likely to enjoy a much longer life than his parents and grandparents. Life expectancy of both men and women has increased in every Asian and Pacific country during the past decade.

The child is also likely to have fewer siblings than his parents: Declining fertility rates in the Asia-Pacific region during the past decades mean that by last year, the region-wide fertility rate was equal to the 'replacement level', at 2.1 children per woman. In the recorded history of the region, it has never been this low.

Falling fertility combined with increased life expectancy point to another demographic trend that has implications reaching far into the future, namely an ageing population. The proportion of the elderly is increasing in all subregions of Asia and the Pacific. Today, almost 300 million people in the region are 65 years or older.

Another trend for policymakers to note.

In the wake of a devastating financial crisis, a remarkably positive message is confirmed by the economic figures in the yearbook: The Asia-Pacific region and Africa were the only regions in the world to experience positive GDP growth in 2009. The Asia-Pacific region was also the only region in the world to return to pre-financial crisis levels of trade by last year. All the while, low unemployment was maintained, at around 5 per cent on average for the region.

We have the possibility to fully open the door to the 'Asia-Pacific Century'.

However, the economic growth does not bring equal benefits to all. Least developed countries were hit especially hard by a massive decline in overseas development assistance (ODA). In a single year, from 2008 to 2009, ODA levels dropped by 70 per cent.

People in low-income countries are also affected more severely by natural disasters: More than 30 in every 1,000 people living in these countries were affected by a disaster each year during the past decade. By contrast, one in every 1,000 people living in high-income economies was affected. More than 26 million children in the region did not attend primary school in 2008. Women make up 65 per cent of the illiterate population in the region - a figure that has barely improved during the past 20 years.

We need to work harder to ensure that all people in the region are given the best possible opportunities of a productive and healthy life.

The rapid economic expansion and large population also have an environmental impact in the region. During 2000 to 2010, the proportion of primary forests in the region declined by more than 10 per cent. In 2008, Asian and Pacific countries accounted for almost half the world's CO2 emissions. In 1990, that figure was 38 per cent.

There is room and need for the region's leaders to push for a more environmentally sound growth model; such as the green growth model promoted by Escap.

The yearbook paints a picture of a region that is developing economically at impressive speed - even in the midst of a financial crisis that has crippled the more developed economies of the world. The figures also tell the story of a region that provides different and unequal opportunities to its girls and boys; where some countries and areas lag behind in socio-economic development; where a number of the UN Millennium Development Goals are far from achieved; and where the environmental toll of rapid economic development is cause for concern.

It is the job of experts, opinion leaders and decision-makers to look carefully at the evidence and ensure that the debate leading towards policies is fully informed by it. It is also our job to ensure that the statistical systems of the region are supported to meet the enormous demand for more evidence to guide policy dialogue and steer the region towards inclusive, sustainable and resilient societies through well-designed policies.

Let us work together to make sure the seven billionth child and his children's children have the rights and opportunities we all deserve.

The writer is an under-secretary-general of the UN and executive secretary of Escap.

Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Document STIMES0020111018e7aj0002q

© 2011 Factiva, Inc. All rights reserved.