



# Facing the continuing challenge of gender inequality and inequity

► By **JESSICA DATOR-BERCILLA\***

## **Gender Trends in the Philippines**

**T**HE Philippines prides itself in having led in initiatives of integrating and mainstreaming gender into development planning and programs. Some measures for gender and development express an interesting story. For instance, a tool known as the Gender Equity Index (GEI) developed by Social Watch, which attempts “to position and classify countries according to a selection of indicators relevant to gender inequity and based on internationally available and comparable information,” is a case to point. “GEI classifies 154 countries and

\* Jessica Dator-Bercilla is a member of Social Watch Philippines-Vizayas.

conclusively verifies that in no country do women enjoy the same opportunities as men, that high income levels are not necessary for the elimination of gender disparities and that although over the years some aspects of women’s situation have improved, their opportunities in economic and political areas are still clearly limited...The three dimensions included in GEI are: economic activity, empowerment and education. The index’s range of values is from 0 to 100, with lower values indicating greater inequity and higher values greater equity.”<sup>1</sup>

While the Philippines remains among the countries with a relatively high gender equity index (GEI), scoring at 76 alongside Australia and Latvia and ranking 18th out of 149 countries, its pace of development in gender equity over the past four years is dismal at the rate of 3.84— prodding Social Watch International monitors

**Table 1. GEI values in 2007<sup>3</sup>**

Country	GEI 2007
Sweden	89
Finland	84
Rwanda	84
Norway	83
Germany*	80
Barbados	80
Denmark	79
Iceland	79
New Zealand	78
Netherlands	77
Lithuania	77
Spain	77
Australia	76
Philippines	76
Latvia	76
Bahamas	75
Canada	75
Colombia	75
Moldova	74
United Kingdom	74
Bulgaria	74
Estonia	74
Belgium	74
United States of America	74
Croatia	73

to rate the Philippines’ GEI progress as stagnant.<sup>2</sup>

This figure is rather disturbing because its pace of development is almost at the same rate as countries with the lowest scores in the GEI of 2007 (i.e., Cote d’Ivoire with 31 in the GEI and 3.5 in the GEI trends in the past four years). It is outpaced in terms of development in aspects of gender equity by countries that have undergone severe social, political and economic challenges (i.e. Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Croatia), by countries with which it shares similar cultural

**Table 2. Recent GEI trends (2004-2007)<sup>4</sup>**

Country	GEI, percentage evolution (2004 -2007)
Rwanda	17.65
Ecuador	17.28
Guatemala	14.60
Spain	14.42
Lesotho	11.73
Yemen	10.60
Panama	10.54
Belize	10.26
El Salvador	9.77
Peru	9.39
Belgium	9.38
Colombia	8.78
Sierra Leone	8.77
Ethiopia	8.64
Norway	7.98
Nepal	7.23
China	6.35
Bolivia	6.22
Cyprus	5.19
Zambia	5.18
Burundi	4.71
Syria	4.70
Oman	4.69
United Kingdom	4.02
Brazil	3.88
Algeria	3.86
Kazakhstan	3.86
Philippines	3.84
Lebanon	3.51
Côte d'Ivoire	3.50

\*For the measurement of GEI trends necessary values were imputed in order to ensure comparability.

<sup>1</sup> Watch Philippines-Vizayas.

<sup>2</sup> See Social Watch (2007), Gender Equity Index.

<sup>3</sup> Social Watch International (2007), Gender Equity Index.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

backgrounds ( i.e., Ecuador, Guatemala, El Salvador, Columbia, China), and by countries that have often been stereotyped as less open societies (i.e., Oman, Syria, Nepal).

It puzzles gender analysts how such rating could come out of a country that has been known to have made many innovations in the work among women and gender and development and have invested years and resources in capacity building and mainstreaming in private and public organizations.

### Measuring up to the MDG Gender Targets

There are basically four indicators in the MDGs against which progress in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women is measured: the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education; the ratio of literate women to men ( 15-24 years old); share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector; proportion of seats held by women in national parliament.

According to the data on MDG indicators in the Philippines from the data base of the Department of Education and the Commission on Higher Education, compared to the base year of 1993, the latest statistics

indicate that more females are able to complete secondary school as compared to their male counterparts (Please see table on Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education).

Literacy differences between males and females are also statistically insignificant over the past periods of examination beginning 1990-2003. However, an alarming trend according to the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW), is this:

“Literacy rates of both sexes dropped significantly in 2003. Unlike the previous survey results, the 2003 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reported lower functional literacy rates for both sexes, although women still have a higher literacy rate compared to men. In 2003, female literacy rate stood at 86.3 while the male literacy rate was 81.9. Simple literacy rates were registered at 95.5 percent for women and 94 percent for men.”<sup>5</sup>

However, when examining the context of wage employment, a different story emerges. The share of women in wage employment seems to have slightly increased from the base year of 1990 in comparison to 2003 figures. Yet, it cannot be denied that the data from the Labor Force Survey of the National Statistics Office

### Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Primary	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.1
Secondary	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.6
Tertiary	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.2	

Source: Department of Education (DepEd) for data on primary and secondary education and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for tertiary education data.

### Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
40.6	40.4	40.2	40.3	40.1	40.0	39.0	39.7	41.0	41.3	41.1	41.0	42.1	41.2

Source: National Statistics Office - Labor Force Survey

### Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament (%)

(Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines)

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total			11.3			10.7			12.3			17.3	17.4	17.4	17.6
Senate	8.7	8.7	16.7	17.4	17.4	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.0	13.6	13.6	12.5	13.0	13.6	16.7
House of Representatives			10.7			10.0			12.3			17.8	17.8	17.8	17.7

Source: Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines

<sup>5</sup> NCRFW, Factsheets on Filipino Women: Education and Training, March 2006.

also reflect the manifest inequity in wage employment that may favor men as compared to women (Please see table on share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector).

The inequality is more evident when political participation in the higher arena on decision making is closely examined. Despite the country's having a female president, political participation by women in national legislative bodies is still low.

The abovementioned data show some improvement in females' access to education, representation in the House of Representatives and Senate and share in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector compared to the base year of 1990. However, these improvements appear to be relatively low, considering the extent and intensity of gender and development programs, both by the government and nongovernment organizations, that were pursued in the Philippines in the last decade.

### **Examining gender trends**

The data presented deliver a simple message: The Philippines may be relentlessly attempting to mainstream gender equality and equity in public and private institutions, plans and programs, yet the efforts may not be enough to facilitate a transformative process that will produce equality and equity between women and men in the Philippines.

### **Beyond the claims of gender equality in education**

Access to and completion of primary and secondary education in general are perceived to be the more pressing issues in education rather than gender inequity in this context of education in the Philippines. The elimination of gender disparity as an indicator of development is attached to the premise that being educated reduces vulnerabilities to poverty. As such, girls will have as much opportunities as boys for development. Yet, it is to be remembered that the initiative towards attaining gender equality in education should be taken in the broader context of the access to education to all boys and girls in the general population.

Equality of rights and entitlements to education for boys and girls extend beyond those who are en-

rolled in school. And for those in school, this equality should be seen beyond just being in school and should be analyzed in terms of what that access to education signifies. Education is supposed to provide the equal opportunity for human, social, economic, cultural, civic and political development that will ultimately lead to a society that respects and allows the exercise of rights and entitlements and one that is fair and just.<sup>6</sup>

How well has the Philippine educational system provided the opportunity for human, social, economic, cultural, civic and political development for boys and girls in the primary, secondary and tertiary education? The decline in quality of education in the Philippines has been documented by the Philippine Human Development Report of 2000.

Moreover, the education provided to Filipino students should be manifest in changes in gender relationships in households, communities, structures of governance, modes of employment, religion, rules of market and trade, economic policies, among others. How much of the equal opportunities to boys and girls, women and men in education translate themselves in the way the Philippine national and local governments and private institutions address gender inequities in the Philippines society? How much of the laws we claim to be gender-fair, take stock of the impact of countless development programs on women and men?

If education is supposed to be a path to social transformation, development planners and project implementers may have to face the challenge of ensuring that the access to education of boys and girls indeed spells access to a meaningful social, cultural, political, civic, economic learning process that can drive students with the passion to pursue not economic progress alone but a society that is truly human, fair, and just.

### **The invisibility of women's productive value prevails**

The decline of women's share in nonagricultural wage labor from the data of 2002 compared to 2003 is a matter of concern as well. In the era where it had been believed that women take a more active productive role, why is this decline reported? Can this be attributed to lack of employment opportunities in the nonagricultural sector and prevalence of unpaid work

---

<sup>6</sup> See explanation on gender equality of opportunity and equity of outcomes in Helen Derbyshire (2002), *A Practical Guide for Development Policy Makers and Practitioners*, UK:DFID Social Development Division, p7.

in urban centers? Or can this be attributed to the fact that cases of women's productive contribution in the informal sector and subcontracting mode of the Philippine economy may have not been factored into this analysis of nonagricultural wage employment?

Employment trends in the Philippines indicate a rise of employment in the service sector (which is dominated by women) and a rise in overseas employment which to a great extent is driven by the need for women domestic helpers, nurses, caregivers. The contribution of women in the productive lives of their households and communities does not seem to be given due credit—be it in the form of unpaid or undervalued labor or in the invisibility of their productive efforts in the national data.

### Representing women: What does this mean?

For years gender advocates in the Philippines have unceasingly built capacities of local government units and nongovernment and people's organizations, and lobbied and successfully pushed for the passage of significant laws to address concerns of women (i.e Women in Nation Building Act; Anti-Violence Against Women and Children). However, in its review of the gender mainstreaming programs of organizations with gender programs across the country, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) observed that issues of gender equity and equality will only be ably addressed in many organizations and programs beyond trainings and organizational structures if "rights and results-based perspectives are at its core."<sup>7</sup>

And while the Philippines has proceeded to enact trailblazing and cutting-edge laws in gender and development, the actualization of the vision set out by those laws are wanting in terms of implementation. This lack of political will in the government to actively pursue the principles and choices written down in the laws is a major hurdle for the Philippines as it attempts to reach its targets in gender equity and empowerment.

It must be noted that Rwanda made innovations to allow better participation of women in their political and economic affairs that are very similar to Philippine legislations. Yet, the innovations in laws and policies seem to have been more encouraging to women in Rwanda as compared to women in the Philippines. Can this lack of interest in political participation in decision-making bodies be an offshoot of cultural stereotyping, discrimination or just sheer frustration and disgust on the destructive political strategies used in Philippine politics? Because of the latter, do women in the country opt to find their niche where they think their capacities could best serve the interest of their immediate and broader communities rather than participating in processes of government and governance?



Furthermore, it is to be remembered that representation of women in the political arena also serves a broader purpose other than accounting for the percentage of women in politics. The essence of representation is not just in the presence, rather, it is in the giving of a voice to many voiceless women and their concerns in processes of government and governance. Representation is also a means to a broader end that seeks to enable women—and men, to claim their entitlements and secure and exercise their rights as human beings. When voices of women in government are devoid of

<sup>7</sup> NCRFW, Factsheet on Filipino Women, March 2006, p.1.

sensitivity to the plight of women (i.e. women whose labor are not given due value, who are sexually abused, who are displaced because of internal armed conflict and exploitative industries), can it be said that indeed there is women representation?

### **Facing challenges of gender inequality and inequity**

What is blatantly obvious from the statistical reports is the fact that gender inequality and inequity persist in Philippine society. The slow pace of development towards gender equality and inequity in the Philippines is a testament to this.

Yet, it cannot be denied as well that perhaps, the women's contribution in political decision-making and in productive enterprises or engagements are not captured very well by the tools of research that intend to measure the indicators of gender equity and empowerment in the Philippines. This may be one of the reasons behind NCRFW's suggestion to improve systems for gender tracking in education, training, employment and in other areas of development. Many Philippine societies are matriarchal in nature. Though women do not take the legitimate political position in households or communities, many women have influenced policies and major decisions in public and private office. Furthermore, many cases of women-led productive efforts in the Philippines, especially in households suffering in poverty, have been heavily documented. Yet, these efforts of women in the nonagricultural sector may have not been given due credit in official measures

of gender equity and empowerment. A challenge for monitoring gender equity in the Philippines is how can we actively and innovatively document and contribute to the continuing process of gender mainstreaming, as well as effectively capture valid and reliable measures of gender equity and empowerment.

On the other hand, moving onwards to hit the MDG targets may require that policies and programs that restrict access of boys and girls to quality education; women and men to quality employment; and women to meaningful participation in processes of significant decision-making, be reviewed. Applying the principle of gender equity, there is a need to take significant action in ensuring that women get better access to employment opportunities that pay justly for their work, enhance their public participation capacities by developing women leaders who truly represent women's concerns, and that allow for better access of females to quality education opportunities.

Corresponding policies and programs that facilitate equality and equity among women and men that will result from the review will have to be developed and or improved. However, for as long as there is no real recognition of the basic rights of women and men to access quality education, meaningful employment and sustainable livelihoods, and to participate significantly in decision-making processes that matter most to the nation in the programs and policies implemented in the country, the Philippines' gender and development efforts will not bear the outcomes being aspired for by its advocates. ■