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Is the situation of women in Asia improving or deteriorating?

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Observers disagree about the impact of economic development on women's situation under various historical conditions. One group argues that development enhances the status of women by improving their access to resources, increasing their autonomy and power, and benefiting their general well-being. An opposing viewpoint is that any apparent advances in women's situation under development are illusory or offset by a deterioration in other aspects of women's status. Proponents of this view cite women's lack of political power, legal barriers to full social and economic participation, differences between men and women in occupational status and pay levels, a loss of control over agricultural resources, and high levels of violence against women in economically advanced societies. Using several indicators of status, this Research Report assesses women's situation, especially in relation to men, in a variety of economic and cultural settings found in Asia. Where possible, it describes how their situation has changed during the last two to three decades and notes whether any tendency toward improvement or degradation can be observed according to a society's development level.

A major debate in the literature on the status of women concerns the impact of economic development on the autonomy, resources, and well-being of women as compared with men of their class or caste. One view regards our species' ancestral way of life—hunting and gathering—as an Eden for women. In that setting, women's economic and social contributions typically were as important for survival and as highly valued as men's, and the genders often lived harmoniously as equals (e.g., Draper 1975; Engels 1972; Friedl 1975; but compare with Collier and Rosaldo 1981). Those who view hunting and gathering as

an idyllic existence for women often regard the invention of agriculture and the development of complex societies as women's downfall, a development in which they lost their traditional resource base and were reduced to dependency on men (Blumberg 1978; Boserup 1970). Only with advanced industrialization did they regain a modicum of autonomy.

A somewhat narrower version of the hypothesis that development has been bad for women takes early nineteenth-century agrarian societies in the West as its starting point, arguing that despite the legal and political liabilities married women faced in such societies, they

wielded considerable domestic power because of their critical economic role as helpmates. Husband and wives, it is argued, were roughly equal because women's work—raising vegetables, keeping poultry, making clothing, cooking, cleaning, and otherwise caring for family members—made them as critical to family survival as were men. According to this view, the rough balance between the sexes within the domestic sphere was undermined by the Industrial Revolution, which took men outside the home and allowed them to monopolize new and increasingly important market resources (e.g., cash income) while leaving women laboring under preindustrial conditions (Engels [1884] 1972). Again, only with advanced industrialization and the mass movement of women into the paid work force has there been a reduction in gender inequality.

An alternative view argues that women in preindustrial agrarian societies in the West had little autonomy or domestic authority, that the movement of men into the "dirty" capitalist world outside the home actually enhanced women's moral authority in the domestic sphere, and that women subsequently increased their political power by gaining the vote and entering the work force in large numbers (Smith 1973). In this view, development is implicitly argued to have enhanced the status of women more or less from the start. There is no dark period of lost status followed by a recapturing of at least some of this status during the late stages of industrialization.

All of these viewpoints agree that development eventually gives women some degree of autonomy, resources, and power. In still other views, however, this assumption is questioned, especially in the context of contemporary Third World countries, where any apparent advances in women's situation are argued to be illusory or offset by a deterioration

in other aspects of their position (Boserup 1990; Heyzer 1986; Joekes et al. 1994; Mies 1986; Vlassoff 1994). Proponents of this last viewpoint often mention the lack of political participation by women in most developing and developed countries, at least as political candidates and office holders, although perhaps not as voters; the legal barriers against women's full social and economic participation; large discrepancies between the sexes in occupations and pay levels; a loss of access to or control of agricultural resources under economic modernization; and high levels of violence against women in familial and other settings. This view holds that the progress that women are claimed to have made is illusory and that economic development tends to benefit men disproportionately, often degrading the position of women.

Whether these largely negative portrayals of the impact of development on the status of women apply equally to Asia as to other parts of the world is unclear. Writers on Asia (e.g., Greenhalgh 1980), however, have joined those who decry the situation of women under development, despite the evidence that family systems and mortality regimes in much of South and East Asia historically disadvantaged women. Thus, for both Asia and elsewhere, there is extensive disagreement in the literature on women and development about the impact of development on women's status under various historical conditions. This disagreement sets the stage for the current review of women's situation in Asia.

We do not attempt a systematic test of alternative hypotheses about women and development. Rather, using several indicators, we ask whether the situation of women, especially in relation to that of men, appears to have improved or deteriorated during the last three to four decades in a variety of economic and cultural settings found within the re-

gion. Our aim is to describe the current situation of women in selected Asian countries; where possible, we also describe how their situation appears to be improving or worsening and note whether any systematic tendency toward improvement or degradation can be observed according to the development level of each country considered.

ASIA'S SUBREGIONS

It is common to subdivide Asia into several subregions that differ historically in culture and colonial experience, and that are currently at different average levels of economic and demographic development. Commonly distinguished are East Asia, which includes, among other countries and territories, China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan; Southeast Asia, which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand; and South Asia, including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The countries of East Asia are heavily influenced by Confucian cultural traditions and have strong historical ties to one another. At present, East Asia is also the richest and demographically most advanced subregion of Asia. (In some classifications, Singapore is included in this group because of its largely Chinese population and high level of economic and demographic development, although its geographic location and political alliances place it within Southeast Asia.)

Characteristic of East Asian cultures are patriarchal family systems that emphasize the male line of descent and prescribe a multigenerational family household that includes at least two generations of men (father and adult son or sons) plus in-marrying women and dependent children. Such family systems have historically tended to give

women little autonomy or power, especially during the prime childbearing years (Dyson and Moore 1983). The wife of the senior male in the household may control the day-to-day lives of the household's younger wives, but her power does not extend beyond them, and she herself will have risen from a position of servitude as a young wife. Although many households have been unable to achieve the joint patrilineal ideal, the aspiration to do so has tended to disadvantage women, who are trained from an early age to play the role of obedient daughter-in-law.

To a remarkable extent, the family systems traditionally found in South Asia, especially in the northerly portion of that region, are like those found traditionally in East Asia, despite different religious and cultural traditions (mostly Hinduism and Islam, with some Buddhism). As in East Asia, continuation of the male family line is an important cultural value. Women marry into a household organized around two or more generations of closely related men and have little power or autonomy until after childbearing age, if then. In Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and northern India (but not in Sri Lanka), a woman tends to have few resources and little autonomy or power for much of her life unless her husband becomes the senior male in the household (Dyson and Moore 1983). Even then her power and autonomy are generally limited.

With the exception of Singapore, the countries of Southeast Asia have been dominated historically by Malay and Buddhist cultural traditions that, on the whole, are more benign to women during the prime adult years than are the cultural traditions found in either East or South Asia. Family systems in Southeast Asia tend to give equal emphasis to male and female lines of descent, or to emphasize female lines more heavily than male lines (see, e.g., Geertz 1961;

Geertz and Geertz 1975). They also tend to place more emphasis on the conjugal unit than do the patrilineally oriented family systems of East and South Asia. Thus, although women in Southeast Asia have not traditionally enjoyed equality with men, their situation has been on the whole less oppressed than in the surrounding subregions.

These cultural differences among Asia's subregions have combined with varying degrees of economic development to produce widely differing situations for women across the continent. To assess those differences, we examine five key indicators of women's situation in each subregion: education and literacy, employment, age at marriage, health and longevity, and sex preferences for children.

INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S SITUATION

Conceptually, there are two types of indicators of women's status that can be examined (although the line between them is sometimes blurred): (1) indicators of the means to desirable outcomes or statuses in life, and (2) indicators of the desirable outcomes or statuses themselves. Commonly available indicators that fall under the category of means indicators include educational levels and literacy; employment status and occupation; and, because it indicates the material and psychological resources with which women enter marriage, women's age at marriage, both their absolute age and their age relative to that of their spouse. Outcome indicators include health and longevity and, as an overall indicator of the value of males versus females in the society, sex preferences for children.

Other indicators of both means and outcomes exist. For example, in addition

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to literacy and school enrollment rates, years or grades of schooling completed can be used to assess women's educational attainment. For the current review, however, because our interest is in assessing change, we avoid using indicators that are available for only a few countries of the region or for a single point in time (which is the case for years or grades of schooling completed). We also avoid using indicators known to be unreliable—for example, maternal mortality rates and most health measures. In what follows, we examine statistics for indicators that are widely available and reasonably reliable, beginning with the fundamental economic means to a better life: education and employment.

EDUCATION AND LITERACY

As Table 1 shows for the years surrounding 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990, both the level of female illiteracy and the size of the illiteracy gender gap vary enormously across countries. In South Asia, with the exception of Sri Lanka, female illiteracy is very high and the gender gap large. In contrast, in East Asia, with the exception of China and Taiwan (in the years for which data are available), the level of female illiteracy is low and the gender gap small. Data are unavailable for many East Asian countries because governments no longer consider it worth collecting statistics on a phenomenon that has become practically nonexistent. The

Southeast Asian countries generally hold an intermediate position between the South and East Asian countries, although illiteracy among females in the Philippines and Thailand is quickly approaching the low level found in East Asia.

As the primary school enrollment statistics shown in Table 2 indicate, the Southeast Asian countries are likely to erase the gender gap in illiteracy in the near future. In 1989–90, the female-to-male ratio of primary school pupils was well above .90 in all four major countries of Southeast Asia, a level similar to the ratios found in most East Asian countries. Levels were lower in most of South Asia, although even there female enrollments have been gaining over time. At the secondary school level, female-to-male enrollment ratios were also very high in East and Southeast Asia around 1990 (Table 3). Thus, female illiteracy is fast disappearing in Asia except in the northerly countries of South Asia. This suggests that economic development does not harm the schooling of girls (but cf. Greenhalgh 1985). To the contrary, the history of female education in the most rapidly developing countries of East and Southeast Asia strongly suggests that an important accompaniment of development is improvement in female schooling, both in absolute terms and relative to the schooling of males.

Although the gender gap in primary and secondary schooling has all but disappeared in most of East and Southeast Asia, it remains substantial at the tertiary level, where the number of females enrolled rarely reaches three-quarters of the number of males enrolled (Tables 4 and 5). The Philippines constitutes an exception here: since the 1960s, the number of females enrolled in tertiary education in the Philippines has exceeded the number of males. As Table 5 shows, the Philippines is also an exception in that almost as many females as males are enrolled in technical

Table 1. Percentage of women illiterate and difference between female and male illiteracy rates, for ages 20–24, by year and country: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Circa 1960		Circa 1970		Circa 1980		1990 estimates (ages 15+)	
	% F	%F-%M	% F	%F-%M	% F	%F-%M	% F	%F-%M
South Asia								
Bangladesh	u	u	81	27	75	22	78	25
India	82	32	67	29	63	29	66	28
Nepal	98	18	96	27	87	29	87	24
Pakistan	89	25	82	23	79	24	79	26
Sri Lanka	22	14	11	5	10	3	16	10
Southeast Asia								
Indonesia	59	30	26	12	21	10	32	16
Malaysia	u	25	u	u	20	9	30	16
Philippines	16	1	8	*	8	-1	10	*
Thailand	21	9	9	4	4	2	10	6
East Asia								
China	u	u	u	u	23	18	38	22
Hong Kong	19	13	6	3	u	u	u	u
Japan	*	0	u	u	u	u	u	u
South Korea	15	9	2	1	u	u	6	6
Singapore	u	u	15	7	4	1	u	u
Taiwan	40	25	u	u	u	u	u	u

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook* (1965, table 5; 1970, table 1.4; 1978–79, table 1.3; 1986, table 1.3; 1991, table 1.3); United Nations, DESIPA (1994, series 2.1).

Note: Reference years and age ranges for individual countries may vary somewhat from those indicated, illiteracy may be defined as never having attended school, and data may not represent all areas of every country. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request. Percentages in this and subsequent tables have been rounded, which may have introduced small errors in some cases.

u—data are unavailable. * Less than 1 percent.

subjects (mathematics and physical sciences) and substantially more are enrolled in business, law, trades, and agriculture. In most countries for which statistics are available, female-to-male enrollment ratios are most favorable in the humanities, social sciences, and services. Although they are much less favorable in the technical, business, and professional fields, the situation has improved over time: female-to-male enrollment ratios have been rising in most countries. (We do not know precisely why the Philippines ratio in the "other and not specified" category has been falling; changes in definitions or statistical coverage may play a role.) Thus, even though women are unlikely to achieve parity with men at the tertiary level of schooling in the near future throughout most of Asia, some of the gender segregation by field that has characterized higher education may be easing.

In sum, with the notable exception of Sri Lanka, women's schooling is

Table 2. Female-to-male ratio of pupils enrolled at the primary level of education, by year and country: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	1960-61	1970	1980	1989-91
South Asia				
Bangladesh	u	0.47	0.59	0.79
India	0.47	0.60	0.64	0.71
Nepal	0.39	0.18	0.39	0.47
Pakistan	0.33	0.37	0.49	0.52
Sri Lanka	u	0.89	0.92	0.93
Southeast Asia				
Indonesia	0.75	0.85	0.85	0.93
Malaysia	0.74	0.88	0.94	0.95
Philippines	0.92	0.92	0.96	0.96
Thailand	0.89	0.89	0.92	0.96
East Asia				
China	u	u	0.82	0.86
Hong Kong	0.82	0.92	0.92	0.93
Japan	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.95
South Korea	0.82	0.92	0.96	0.94
Singapore	0.79	0.89	0.92	0.90
Taiwan	0.89	u	u	u

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook* (1966, table 2.10; 1975, table 4.2; 1985, table 3.4; 1991, table 3.4); United Nations, DESIPA (1994, series 2.3).

Note: Reference years for individual countries may vary somewhat from those indicated. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable.

Table 3. Female-to-male ratios of enrollments at the secondary level of education, by year and country: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Total				General				Vocational and teacher training			
	1960	1970	1980	1990	1960	1970	1980	1990	1960	1970	1980	1990
South Asia												
Bangladesh	u	0.17	0.31	0.46	u	0.17	0.32	0.46	u	0.05	0.09	0.21
India	0.31	0.39	0.49	u	0.32	0.39	0.49	0.54	0.25	0.60	0.48	0.42
Nepal	0.19	u	0.25	0.37	0.17	0.16	u	u	0.40	u	u	u
Pakistan	0.19	0.25	0.35	0.39	0.19	0.25	0.35	0.39	0.43	0.41	0.20	0.34
Sri Lanka	u	u	1.04	u	u	0.97	1.04	1.06	u	0.52	0.92	u
Southeast Asia												
Indonesia	0.47	0.52	0.68	0.81	0.43	0.59	0.69	0.82	0.77	0.35	0.62	0.77
Malaysia	0.51	0.69	0.91	1.02	0.51	0.69	0.92	1.04	0.50	0.89	0.42	0.33
Philippines	0.84	u	1.14	0.99	0.89	u	u	u	0.61	u	u	u
Thailand	0.59	0.72	u	0.93	0.61	0.69	0.84	0.97	0.51	0.78	1.04	0.75
South Asia												
China	u	0.64	0.65	0.73	u	0.65	0.66	0.72	u	u	0.47	0.83
Hong Kong	0.65	0.72	0.97	0.97	0.67	0.74	1.02	1.04	0.45	0.50	0.47	0.46
Japan	0.91	0.98	0.98	0.97	0.96	1.03	1.00	0.99	0.64	0.79	0.88	0.87
South Korea	0.34	0.61	0.83	0.91	0.37	0.65	0.85	0.87	0.21	0.41	0.78	1.13
Singapore	0.64	0.91	1.00	u	0.67	1.03	1.06	1.00	0.69	0.14	0.29	u
Taiwan	0.52	u	u	u	0.79	u	u	u	0.45	u	u	u

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook* (1965, tables 12-14; 1966, table 2.8; 1975, table 4.3; 1985, table 3.7; 1986, table 3.7; 1988, table 3.5; 1991, table 3.7); United Nations, DESIPA (1994, series 2.4).

Note: Reference years and education categories for individual countries may

vary somewhat from those indicated, and data do not represent all areas of every country. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable.

poorly developed in South Asia but is relatively well developed elsewhere in the region and promises to become even more so in the near future. The wealthier countries of East Asia and the rapidly developing countries of Southeast Asia have either achieved or are fast approaching gender parity in schooling at the primary and secondary levels. Although women continue to be underrepresented at the tertiary level of schooling (with the exception of the Philippines, where men are underrepresented), female-to-male enrollment ratios have risen recently in many countries and differences between men and women in fields of study have shrunk. Women's schooling therefore appears to improve rather than worsen as countries develop economically.

EMPLOYMENT

Improved education for women is likely to translate fairly directly into an improved set of life chances because schooling is associated with improvements in the ability to understand social and legal conditions and to learn about services and practices important for health and survival. The relationship of employment to the status of women is more ambiguous. One reason is that the relationship depends on the type of work. Employment as an unpaid family worker gives the worker less control of resources or rights to determine household or personal decisions than does independent, paid employment. Even employment that earns income may fail to give a worker control of resources or a say in important household decisions if by

The shift away from unpaid family work that occurs with development suggests that development enhances women's status.

Table 4. Female-to-male ratio of enrollments at all tertiary-level institutions and in universities and equivalent institutions, by year: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	All tertiary-level institutions				Universities and equivalent institutions			
	1960	1970	1980	1990	1960	1970	1980	1990
South Asia								
Bangladesh	u	0.11	0.16	0.19	u	0.16	0.22	0.28
India	0.20	0.31	0.35	0.43	u	u	0.39	u
Nepal	0.05	0.21	0.23	u	0.21	0.22	0.23	u
Pakistan	0.14	0.27	0.37	0.37	0.22	0.27	0.37	0.37
Sri Lanka	u	0.97	0.75	0.69	0.47	0.75	0.67	0.75
Southeast Asia								
Indonesia	0.33	0.34	0.45	0.47	u	0.38	0.43	0.47
Malaysia	0.30	0.42	0.63	0.85	0.30	0.41	0.53	0.72
Philippines	1.04	1.25	1.13	u	u	u	1.17	u
Thailand	0.43	0.72	0.67	u	u	0.72	0.67	u
East Asia								
China	u	0.48	0.30	0.49	u	u	u	u
Hong Kong	0.67	0.42	0.35	0.54	0.37	0.49	0.52	0.54
Japan	0.25	0.39	0.49	0.64	0.16	0.23	0.30	0.37
South Korea	0.20	0.32	0.32	0.47	0.19	0.28	0.28	0.41
Singapore	0.45	0.43	0.64	u	0.30	0.54	0.79	0.90
Taiwan	0.30	u	u	u	0.27	u	u	u

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook* (1965, table 15; 1970, table 2.13; 1972, table 4.2; 1975, table 5.1; 1985, table 3.11; 1986, table 3.11; 1986, table 3.11; 1987, table 2.13; 1991, table 3.11).

u—data are unavailable.

tradition or employers' practices a woman's earnings are handed over to other family members or her work is seen as part of her duties as a wife or daughter (Jain 1970; Salaff 1981).

Unfortunately, although many national statistical accounts provide information on the type of work performed by women and men, more direct measures of control over earnings are rarely available. Our description of women's economic situation in Asia is therefore limited to the kind of formally recognized work they perform. Past studies (e.g., Dixon-Mueller and Anker 1988) suggest that formally recognized work itself often constitutes only a fraction of all the productive or facilitative work done by women, especially married women. Official employment statistics are thus likely to underestimate women's economic contributions to households, communities, and the economy at large. Whether this implies that the extent of women's economic power or autonomy is also underestimated is less clear. Where women's labor receives little social recognition, it seems likely to yield them little power or autonomy, regardless of its objective characteristics.

We begin by examining the form of work that is least likely to yield power or control over resources to women—namely, employment as an unpaid family worker.¹ In most countries of the region, women are more likely than men to be unpaid family workers, as the female-to-male ratios shown in the right-hand portion of Table 6 indicate (all but one ratio having a value over 1.00). In most Asian countries for

Table 5. Female-to-male ratio of enrollments at the tertiary level, by field of study and year: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Field of study	1960	1970	1980	1990
South Asia					
Bangladesh	Total	u	0.11	0.16	0.19
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	u	0.12	0.18	0.22
	Mathematics and physical sciences	u	0.10	0.17	0.20
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	u	0.01	0.10	0.12
	Other and not specified	u	u	0.28	u
India	Total	0.21	0.29	0.35	0.42
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.28	0.34	0.41	0.68
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.13	0.28	0.36	0.31
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.01	0.18	0.08	0.24
	Other and not specified	1.45	0.02	0.26	0.33
Nepal	Total	0.26	0.22	0.24	0.25
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.32	0.24	0.38	0.33
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.16	0.16	0.25	0.28
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.03	0.02	0.08	0.14
	Other and not specified	u	u	u	u
Pakistan	Total	0.14	0.23	0.37	0.22
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.19	0.36	0.92	0.68
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.09	0.22	0.38	0.42
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.07
	Other and not specified	u	0.23	0.23	0.20
Sri Lanka	Total	u	0.76	u	0.68
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	u	0.96	2.34	1.19
	Mathematics and physical sciences	u	0.53	u	0.74
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	u	0.20	u	0.40
	Other and not specified	u	u	u	0.81
Southeast Asia					
Indonesia	Total	0.20	0.38	0.47	0.48
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.17	0.52	0.60	0.56
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.35	0.48	0.62	0.48
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.15	0.18	0.36	0.39
	Other and not specified	u	0.02	0.80	0.12
Malaysia	Total	0.48	0.42	0.63	0.90
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.59	0.63	0.93	1.25
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.26	0.24	0.53	0.57
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.04	0.10	0.34	1.02
	Other and not specified	u	0.40	2.16	0.43
Philippines	Total	1.06	1.22	1.15	1.43
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	1.46	1.63	3.38	2.57
	Mathematics and physical sciences	2.10	4.26	3.32	0.97
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.11	0.08	0.84	1.63
	Other and not specified	0.92	1.23	0.58	0.35
Thailand	Total	0.40	0.72	u	u
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.59	1.10	u	u
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.76	0.95	u	u
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.07	0.16	u	u
	Other and not specified	u	u	u	u
East Asia					
China	Total	u	u	u	0.50
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	u	u	u	u
	Mathematics and physical sciences	u	u	u	u
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	u	u	u	u
	Other and not specified	u	u	u	u

¹An unpaid family worker is anyone who reports herself as working but who is unpaid and works on a family farm or in some other kind of family-run enterprise (where "family" can be defined in a variety of ways).

Table 5. Female-to-male ratio of enrollments at the tertiary level, by field of study and year: Asia, recent decades (continued)

Subregion and country	Field of study	1960	1970	1980	1990
Hong Kong	Total	0.32	0.42	0.50	0.53
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.70	0.90	1.27	1.24
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.28	0.25	0.33	0.36
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.14	0.02	0.33	0.36
	Other and not specified	u	0.65	0.83	1.07
Japan	Total	0.30	0.39	0.49	0.63
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.35	0.57	0.75	0.93
	Mathematics and physical sciences	1.17	0.40	0.43	0.54
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.07
	Other and not specified	0.05	0.47	0.33	0.75
South Korea	Total	0.24	0.32	0.35	0.32
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.35	0.48	0.91	1.47
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.41	0.88	0.64	1.24
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.03	0.02	0.06	0.20
	Other and not specified	0.23	u	0.35	0.64
Singapore	Total	0.31	0.43	0.64	0.72
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.41	0.92	2.78	2.75
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.25	0.47	0.97	1.22
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.18	0.08	0.35	0.42
	Other, not specified	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.26
Taiwan	Total	0.31	u	u	u
	Humanities, social sciences, and services	0.53	u	u	u
	Mathematics and physical sciences	0.26	u	u	u
	Business, law, trades, and agriculture	0.07	u	u	u
	Other and not specified	u	u	u	u

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook*: (1965, table 16; 1973, table 4.3; 1985, table 3.12; 1991, table 3.12); United Nations, DESIPA (1994, series 2.5).

Notes: UNESCO's definitions of the fields of study listed in this table changed slightly in the latter two years from those in the first two. Reference years for individual countries may also vary somewhat from those indicated. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable.

which data are available over time, however, the percentage of female workers found in this employment category has declined, as has the female-to-male ratio. This trend undoubtedly reflects the decline of unpaid family work that tends to occur with industrialization and the proletarianization of the labor force.

Some societies in Asia have maintained a high level of family-run enterprises during the industrialization process; nonetheless, even in those countries the proportion of workers employed as unpaid family workers has declined with time. To the extent that unpaid family work does little to enhance

women's status, the shift away from such work that occurs with development lends support to the thesis that development enhances rather than diminishes women's status.

Whether this is the case, however, depends in part on whether women no longer working as unpaid family workers enter the paid labor force or are instead left unemployed. Table 7 presents changes over time in the female-to-male ratio of percentages who are economically active. Although the economically active population includes individuals working as unpaid family employees, the table nevertheless gives an indication of women's potential access to earn-

ings or income. Most of the countries in Table 7 for which data are available do not show marked changes in the relative percentages of economically active women; but where change has occurred, more often than not it has been in the direction of increased labor force participation by women. Thus, over the period when unpaid family work has gradually declined as a proportion of all economic activity, the economic activity rates of females have increased, even in relation to those of males. This finding suggests that economic development has not simply shoved women, as a group, out of their traditional work without providing access to newer forms of employment. Of course, some individual women or particular subgroups, such as rural women with traditional use-rights to land, may have suffered a loss of economic opportunity (see, e.g., Boserup 1970).

It should be noted that economic development is not the sole determinant of either female or male economic activity rates, as is indicated by the pattern of intercountry variation shown in Table 7 and also in the first two columns of Table 8, which presents the absolute activity rates of females and males over time. South Asia (with the exception, again, of Sri Lanka) shows the lowest female-to-male activity ratios (Table 7). Interestingly, the highest ratios are found in China and Thailand rather than in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or South Korea, where income levels are, on average, far higher. Obviously, political and cultural traditions affect the extent to which women's economic activity rates approach those of men. China and Thailand also show some of the highest absolute levels of economic activity among women (Table 8), those levels being the major reason that the female-to-male ratios are high there as well. The low female economic activity rates seen in most South Asian countries may there-

fore partly reflect cultural traditions that militate against female employment (for example, the practice of female seclusion, or *pardah*), rather than a low level of economic development per se.

In a volume published in 1989 that reviews data through the early-to-mid-1980s, Shirley Nuss and two collaborators argue that women's economic participation rates have been falling in much of Asia and can be expected to recover only if exceptional efforts are made to create new employment opportunities for them. The data shown in the first two columns of Table 8 suggest that this conclusion requires qualification in light of the experience since the mid-1980s. Although female economic activity rates rose only slightly in most of South Asia at the end of the 1980s, in Sri Lanka and many of the more prosperous countries of Southeast and East Asia these rates grew rapidly. Thus, economic growth again is associated with women's increased participation in the paid work force, rather than with declining opportunities for women. Although the causal processes that underlie this association are unclear—economic growth is likely to increase participation opportunities for women, but women's increased participation has also been argued to create economic growth—it appears that development is beneficial to women's participation in paid employment.

Does development also improve the types of work that women are able to find and the pay and work conditions likely to be associated with those types of work? The remainder of Table 8 answers this question with regard to class of employment—that is, whether women and men work as employers or own-account workers, as unpaid family workers, or as paid employees. (Not shown in the table is a residual category of unclassified workers.) In the right-hand column, the index of dissimilarity

Table 6. Percentage of the labor force 15 years old and older classified as unpaid family workers, by sex, and female-to-male ratio of percentages classified as unpaid family workers: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Circa 1970		Circa 1980		Latest		Female/male ratio		
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	ca.1970	ca.1980	Latest
South Asia									
Bangladesh	u	u	u	u	11	20	u	u	0.58
India	18	9	u	u	u	u	2.10	u	u
Nepal	6	2	4	2	u	u	2.67	2.51	u
Pakistan	56	23	28	15	34	14	2.47	1.92	2.37
Sri Lanka	11	4	6	3	u	u	3.15	2.39	u
Southeast Asia									
Indonesia	39	16	30	12	42	13	2.43	2.45	3.23
Malaysia	u	u	18	7	u	u	u	2.54	u
Philippines	30	16	18	15	23	11	1.89	1.18	2.14
Thailand	77	33	18	15	u	u	2.32	1.18	u
East Asia									
China	u	u	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
Hong Kong	4	1	3	1	u	u	2.91	4.11	u
South Korea	52	12	43	8	26	3	4.56	5.05	9.03
Singapore	6	3	4	2	2	1	2.23	2.07	1.31
Taiwan	40	10	u	u	u	u	4.04	u	u

Source: Asian Development Bank (1993a, table 27).

Note: Reference years and age ranges for individual countries may vary somewhat from those indicated, and data do not represent all areas of every country. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable.

Table 7. Female-to-male ratio of the percentage of population economically active, by age group: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Circa 1970			Circa 1980			Latest		
	15+	30-34	50-54	15+	30-34	50-54	15+	30-34	50-54
South Asia									
Bangladesh	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.11	0.14	0.11
India	0.22	0.22	0.21	0.26	0.26	0.23	u	u	u
Nepal	0.39	0.35	0.32	0.52	0.45	0.47	u	u	u
Pakistan	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.13	0.11	0.11
Sri Lanka	0.30	0.30	0.24	0.34	0.35	0.22	0.58	0.64	0.36
Southeast Asia									
Indonesia	0.45	0.42	0.48	0.46	0.42	0.49	0.53	0.49	0.57
Malaysia	0.47	0.43	0.44	0.49	0.42	0.41	u	u	u
Philippines	0.43	0.40	0.42	0.63	0.58	0.63	0.58	0.53	0.60
Thailand	0.84	0.82	0.79	0.80	0.78	0.76	0.81	0.82	0.75
East Asia									
China	u	u	u	0.81	0.90	0.56	0.86	0.92	0.66
Hong Kong	0.51	0.37	0.40	0.60	0.51	0.47	0.60	0.56	0.41
South Korea	0.51	0.38	0.49	0.53	0.34	0.54	0.63	0.50	0.65
Singapore	0.36	0.23	0.20	0.54	0.45	0.23	0.64	0.65	0.39
Taiwan	0.38	0.29	0.24	0.41	0.32	0.24	u	u	u

Source: Asian Development Bank (1993a, table 24).

Note: Data do not represent all areas of every country. Documented exceptions are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable.

Table 8. Economic activity rate and class of employment of the economically active population, by sex: Asia, recent periods

Subregion, country, and year	Economic activity rate (% of population)		% of economically active population, by class of employment						Index of dissimilarity for class of employment (%)
	Women	Men	Women			Men			
			Self- employed	Family worker	Employee	Self- employed	Family worker	Employee	
South Asia									
Bangladesh (10+)									
1961	11	56	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1974	2	53	20	58	18	47	21	29	38
1983-84	5	54	16	11	69	40	16	42	30
1985-86	6	54	17	11	69	40	19	40	32
India									
1961	28	57	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1971	12	52	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1981	22	55	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
Nepal									
1961 (15+)	36	55	78	11	10	77	3	20	10
1971 (10+)	25	59	89	7	4	85	3	12	8
1981 (10+)	32	58	90	4	4	84	2	12	9
Pakistan (10+)									
1961	6	55	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1972	6	54	u	u	u	50	20	20	u
1981	2	51	32	26	35	57	14	26	25
1992-93	8	46	13	48	22	46	16	34	44
Sri Lanka (10+)									
1963	14	50	8	6	76	32	4	56	23
1971	19	51	8	8	53	28	3	54	22
1981	18	49	10	3	55	30	2	55	20
1992	27	55	12	19	49	30	7	53	21
Southeast Asia									
Indonesia (10+)									
1961	20	53	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1971	23	47	29	40	28	45	18	35	23
1980	24	48	46	29	23	56	12	30	18
1989	34	51	29	47	21	51	16	30	31
Malaysia									
1957 (10+)	17	50	24	19	56	38	5	56	14
1970 (10+)	22	44	u	u	u	u	u	u	u
1980 (10+)	25	50	24	16	50	31	7	57	14
1988 (15-64)	26	47	17	22	60	30	7	63	16
Philippines									
1960 (10+)	16	46	26	32	31	49	20	26	23
1970 (10+)	21	46	23	27	41	43	15	39	19
1981	24	49	27	31	42	42	16	42	15
1992 (15+)	48	83	30	20	40	41	10	41	12
Thailand									
1960 (11+)	51	54	11	82	6	47	35	17	47
1970 (11+)	46	52	12	76	10	45	33	20	44
1980 (11+)	49	53	14	68	15	44	28	24	40
1990 (13+)	53	60	18	54	25	41	26	30	29
East Asia									
China									
1982 (15+)	47	57	u	u	u	u	u	u	u

Table 8 (continued)

Subregion, country, and year	Economic activity rate (% of population)		% of economically active population, by class of employment						Index of dissimilarity for class of employment {%}
	Women	Men	Women			Men			
			Self- employed	Family worker	Employee	Self- employed	Family worker	Employee	
Hong Kong									
1961 (6+)	23	54	10	10	79	17	2	79	8
1971 (10+)	29	55	6	4	86	13	1	82	7
1981 (15+)	37	62	4	3	89	12	1	83	8
1991 (15+)	39	62	5	2	89	14	*	82	9
Japan (15+)									
1960	36	58	14	44	42	27	11	61	34
1970	39	63	14	32	53	23	6	70	27
1980	36	62	11	24	63	20	4	74	20
1992	42	64	10	14	74	15	2	81	24
South Korea									
1960 (13+)	17	43	21	57	15	53	17	24	41
1970 (14+)	23	43	17	51	30	43	12	42	40
1980 (14+)	29	47	18	40	35	42	8	44	32
1992 (15+)	47	75	19	22	56	34	2	61	20
Singapore									
1957 (10+)	13	52	14	12	72	22	3	73	10
1970 (10+)	18	51	8	5	68	21	3	69	13
1980 (10+)	33	59	6	4	86	18	2	77	12
1992 (15+)	51	80	6	2	90	17	*	80	11

Sources: United Nations (1994, series 3.5); ILO, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* (1945-89, 1983, 1988, 1992, 1993, tables 1 and 2A).

Notes: The usual age span for the economically active population is 15-64; exceptions are noted in parentheses. Where percentages for women and men do not sum to 100, the residual consists of persons whose employment is not classifiable by status. Because of diverse data-collection methods, the data on

which these percentages are based are not strictly comparable across countries, and some percentages are provisional. Data do not represent all areas of every country. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

u—data are unavailable. * Less than 1 percent.

between the employment-class distributions of females and males indicates the percentage of men (or women) who would have to change their employment class in order for the two class-of-employment distributions to be identical.

Of the dozen countries with data over time for both sexes, five show little change in the index of dissimilarity. Five others show a marked decline in its value, indicating that, over time, the employment-class distribution of female workers has become more similar to the employment-class distribution of male workers. In only two countries (Pakistan and Indonesia) has the index of dissimilarity increased markedly,

in both cases because of a sharp rise in the percentage of females classified as unpaid family workers. We are unable to judge whether this increase in unpaid family workers is real or instead reflects improved enumeration of female workers in the wake of such studies as that by Anker, Khan, and Gupta (1988), showing that conventional methods of reporting female employment seriously underrepresent women's economic participation. Regardless, the predominant trend in the region appears to be a decreasing concentration of female workers in unpaid family work and a concomitant increase in the similarity between men and women in

their class-of-worker distributions.

In addition to information on classes of workers, information is widely available on the occupations of male and female workers. Table 9 shows changes in the occupational distributions of female and male workers and in the index of occupational dissimilarity between the sexes over time. It should be noted that the index of dissimilarity is sensitive to the level of detail with which occupations are classified. Generally, the finer the classification, the larger is the index of dissimilarity (see, e.g., Presser and Kishor 1991). Because we use a broad classification of occupations, the index values we compute are likely to

Table 9. Economically active population (in percentages), by sex and major occupation group: Asia, recent decades

Subregion, country, and year	Professional, technical, and related workers		Administrative and managerial workers		Sales, clerical, and related workers		Service workers		Production- related workers, transport equipment operators, and laborers		Agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry workers; fishermen and hunters		Index of dissimilarity (%)
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
South Asia													
Bangladesh (10+)													
1961	*	1	0	*	1	4	2	2	5	6	92	85	8
1974	2	2	*	*	2	6	10	2	12	11	70	78	12
1989	2	4	0	*	1	15	3	3	4	15	90	60	29
India													
1961	1	4	*	1	2	7	2	3	13	16	82	68	14
1971	2	3	*	1	2	8	3	3	8	14	83	70	15
1981	2	3	*	1	2	9	2	3	6	16	76	63	20
Nepal													
1961 (15+)	*	1	0	1	*	2	*	2	1	3	97	92	5
1971 (10+)	*	1	0	0	1	0	*	1	1	3	98	93	5
1976	4	4	0	*	1	3	*	*	3	7	93	86	6
Pakistan (10+)													
1961	3	4	0	1	1	10	8	5	14	19	71	59	15
1972	5	4	*	1	2	11	4	4	4	19	31	51	45
1981	15	3	1	1	7	11	8	4	24	25	35	50	21
1992-93	6	4	*	1	3	18	4	5	15	26	55	42	27
Sri Lanka													
1963 (10+)	8	7	*	1	3	11	9	7	12	20	57	45	17
1971 (10+)	6	3	*	*	3	13	4	5	12	24	42	39	22
1981 (10+)	9	4	*	1	6	13	4	5	11	25	36	37	25
1985	7	3	*	1	8	14	5	4	17	27	42	40	16
Southeast Asia													
Indonesia (10+)													
1971	2	2	*	1	14	13	5	3	9	12	58	62	8
1980	3	3	0	*	20	14	7	3	15	21	52	56	10
1985	4	3	0	*	22	16	6	2	13	21	53	54	10
Peninsular Malaysia (10+)													
1957	4	7	*	2	4	14	7	7	8	18	75	49	26
1970	5	4	*	1	8	15	8	8	10	23	54	42	20
Sabah													
1960 (15+)	2	5	0	1	3	6	3	3	3	13	89	72	17
1970 (10+)	4	5	0	1	7	9	4	7	3	20	64	53	23
Sarawak													
1960 (15+)	2	5	0	*	2	8	2	3	1	10	94	74	20
1970 (10+)	2	3	0	1	4	9	3	6	3	14	74	61	21
1980 (10+)	7	6	*	1	15	15	7	8	14	27	38	32	14
Philippines													
1960 (10+)	6	4	*	1	13	6	15	3	20	10	35	70	35
1970 (10+)	10	3	1	1	15	7	15	4	19	21	31	60	31
1981	11	4	1	1	25	11	14	10	12	16	37	57	25
1991 (15+)	9	3	1	1	28	9	13	6	11	24	28	48	34
Thailand													
1960 (11+)	1	4	0	*	6	6	2	2	4	8	86	78	8
1970 (11+)	2	4	*	3	7	6	3	3	5	9	83	75	9
1980 (11+)	3	3	*	3	10	7	3	3	8	14	73	67	10
1990 (13+)	4	3	1	2	14	9	4	3	12	19	63	62	9

Table 9 (continued)

Subregion, country, and year	Professional, technical, and related workers		Administrative and managerial workers		Sales, clerical, and related workers		Service workers		Production- related workers, transport equipment operators, and laborers		Agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry workers; fishermen and hunters		Index of dissimilarity (%)
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
East Asia													
China													
1982 (15+)	4	6	*	2	3	4	2	2	13	18	77	68	10
Hong Kong													
1961 (6+)	6	4	1	4	12	23	24	11	45	43	9	6	17
1971 (10+)	6	4	1	3	14	20	15	14	54	50	4	4	8
1981 (15+)	6	6	1	3	26	20	15	16	51	51	2	2	6
1991 (15+)	10	8	2	6	46	24	22	16	17	42	*	1	30
Japan (15+)													
1960	6	10	*	4	21	21	10	4	20	35	43	26	23
1960	6	7	*	6	30	22	11	5	25	43	26	15	25
1980	10	8	1	7	38	26	12	6	24	42	13	9	25
1992	12	11	1	6	42	27	12	7	25	41	7	6	21
South Korea													
1960 (13+)	2	7	1	1	10	10	9	4	6	10	65	60	11
1970 (14+)	2	4	*	1	12	17	11	4	14	25	59	45	21
1980 (14+)	3	5	0	2	19	21	9	5	19	31	43	30	17
1992 (15+)	9	7	*	3	31	27	17	7	22	40	18	14	18
Singapore													
1957 (10+)	10	13	*	2	16	31	35	11	24	32	12	7	29
1970 (10+)	12	6	*	2	23	27	19	10	25	38	3	4	21
1980 (10+)	10	8	2	6	36	22	13	8	33	42	1	2	21
1992 (15+)	19	19	4	14	26	6	14	13	35	39	*	*	22

Sources: ILO, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* (1945-89, 1982, 1983, 1988, 1993, tables 1 and 2B).

Notes: Because of changes made after 1970 in the ILO's International Standard Classification of Occupations, the data on which the percentages in this table are based are not strictly comparable for all periods. The usual age

span for the economically active population is 15-64; exceptions are noted in parentheses. Data do not represent all areas of every country. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

* Less than 1 percent.

understate the true level of occupational segregation quite seriously.

If one compares Asian countries at different stages of development or examines changes in the same countries over time, the trends in the occupational distributions of male and female workers appear to parallel those seen historically in the West. With development, agricultural and other forms of extractive work occupy a decreasing percentage of the labor force, while white-collar and manufacturing employment occupies an increasing pro-

portion. Agricultural work tends initially to employ a larger proportion of female than of male workers (note, for example, the 1961 figures for Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan); but with a decline in such employment comes an increasing participation of women in nonagricultural employment. Especially during the later stages of development, female workers move rapidly into clerical and sales work (for example, in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore), and to a lesser extent into professional,

technical, and related work (in the East Asian countries). Insofar as these forms of white-collar work offer women salaries, prestige, and clean working conditions, the later stages of economic development appear to improve their occupational opportunities.

On the other hand, as the economies of Asia develop, production, transportation, and other forms of blue-collar employment become more heavily male dominated. This tendency, if parallel to the experience in the West, probably

results in large wage discrepancies between the white-collar female employment sector and the blue-collar male sector. Moreover, as the index-of-dissimilarity values shown in the right-hand column of Table 9 suggest, development does not bring with it gender desegregation of the occupational sphere (as it does with class-of-worker distributions). Instead, development tends to exacerbate occupational segregation by gender. Thus, when changes in female versus male occupations are considered, the picture is mixed. Although development draws women into paid and relatively clean forms of work in the white-collar sector, it also segregates them out of the better-paid jobs in the manufacturing sector, thereby perpetuating gender inequality within the labor force. Whether,

on balance, this leaves women better or worse off than under preindustrial, subsistence conditions is unknown.

AGE AT MARRIAGE

Early marriage is thought to undermine women's power and autonomy within the household for at least three reasons. First, a very young age at marriage is typically associated with the bride's residence in an extended-family household, where she is likely to fall under the control of family elders. Especially where such households have a patrilineal structure, this puts young wives at a great disadvantage in acquiring political resources and allies (Dyson and Moore 1983). Second, regardless of household structure, women who marry early are likely to have fewer

Although development draws women into paid and relatively clean forms of work in the white-collar sector, it also segregates them out of the better-paid jobs in the manufacturing sector.

Table 10. Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) for women, differences in SMAM between men and women, and percentages never married among young women, by country and year: Asia: recent decades

Subregion, country, and year	Female SMAM	SMAM difference between men and women	% of women never married	
			Ages 15-19	Ages 20-24
South Asia				
Bangladesh				
1961	13.9	9.0	8	1
1974	15.9	8.1	24	3
1981	16.4	7.5	31	5
India				
1961	15.8	5.8	29	6
1971	17.2	5.2	44	10
1981	18.1	3.2	56	10
1991	20.1	4.1	68	24
Nepal				
1961	15.4	4.1	26	5
1971	16.8	4.0	39	8
1981	17.2	3.5	49	13
1991	18.1	3.3	54	13
Pakistan				
1961	17.6	5.9	47	12
1973	20.0	5.8	72	25
1981	19.7	5.4	68	21
1990	20.6	4.4	75	28
Sri Lanka				
1963	22.1	5.9	85	41
1971	23.5	4.2	89	53
1981	24.4	2.8	90	55
1987	24.8	u	93	57

Table 10 (continued)

Subregion, country, and year	Female SMAM	SMAM difference between men and women	% of women never married	
			Ages 15-19	Ages 20-24
Southeast Asia				
Indonesia				
1964	18.6	u	60	14
1971	19.2	4.5	63	18
1980	20.0	4.0	70	22
1991	21.5	u	80	36
Malaysia				
1960	19.4	5.0	65	21
1970	21.8	3.5	82	41
1980	23.5	2.8	90	51
Philippines				
1960	22.2	2.7	87	33
1970	22.8	2.6	89	41
1980	22.4	2.4	86	51
Thailand				
1960	21.6	2.9	83	35
1970	22.0	2.7	81	38
1980	22.7	2.2	84	44
1987	23.4	1.9	83	48
East Asia				
China				
1960	19.8	u	76	18
1970	20.7	u	87	27
1980	22.8	u	97	54
1990	22.1	1.7	95	41
Hong Kong				
1961	21.9	6.8	94	49
1971	23.8	6.4	97	68
1981	25.3	3.4	97	71
1991	28.2	2.3	98	83
Japan				
1960	25.0	2.4	99	68
1970	24.5	2.9	98	72
1980	25.1	3.6	99	78
1990	26.7	3.5	98	85
South Korea				
1960	21.5	4.9	98	49
1970	23.3	3.9	97	57
1980	24.1	3.2	98	66
1990	25.4	3.1	100	80
Singapore				
1957	20.3	5.7	80	33
1970	24.2	3.6	95	65
1980	26.2	2.2	98	74
1990	27.1	2.8	99	79
Taiwan				
1956	21.1	3.7	88	29
1966	21.9	4.2	91	40
1970	22.6	2.7	93	50
1980	23.8	1.5	95	58
1990	25.9	2.8	98	77

Source: Tsuya (1994).

material and psychological resources at their command than are women who marry after acquiring more life experience (Presser 1971). Finally, women who marry young often marry men who are considerably older than themselves, and some scholars have suggested that this puts them at a great disadvantage or is indicative of a social system that does so (Cain 1993; Presser 1975). For all these reasons, age at marriage and the age difference between husbands and wives are often treated as indicators of women's access to power and autonomy.

Table 10 shows trends in female age at marriage, as measured by the singulate mean age at marriage, or SMAM, a synthetic measure of age at first marriage calculated from the percentages never married at each age. The table also shows differences between the SMAMs for men and women and the percentages of women at ages 15-19 and 20-24 who have not yet married. The overwhelming trend throughout Asia suggested by these data is toward older ages at marriage for women and a declining age difference between the average married man and married woman (see also Tsuya 1994).

The only exception to these trends occurs in countries where female age at marriage was already high by the end of the 1950s and the age difference between married women and men already small (for example, the Philippines). Even in South Asia, where women traditionally were betrothed as children and married shortly after menarche, age at marriage has risen to late adolescence or the early 20s. And in most of East Asia, female age at marriage has risen to the late 20s—so late, in fact, that some governments in the region worry about the negative consequences for fertility and future population growth. Insofar as a higher age at marriage gives women greater resources and power after marrying, the trend toward delayed marriage in Asia suggests that the status of women is improving.

HEALTH AND LONGEVITY

One of the most basic indicators of health and longevity is life expectancy at birth, a synthetic measure of survival that summarizes the age-specific mortality rates found in a population at a given time. Although this measure does not capture all aspects of health (particularly aspects that are not life threatening but may nevertheless degrade the quality of life), it is widely available and conveniently summarizes the risks of dying at various ages. As Table 11 indicates, life expectancies for both females and males vary widely across the region, with survival generally being lowest in South Asia and highest in East Asia, particularly in the wealthier countries of that subregion. Life expectancy has been rising in virtually all the countries examined; indeed, in the period covered in Table 11, life expectancy increased by an average of 2.8–4.7 years per decade among females and 2.7–4.4 years per decade among males.

More important from the standpoint of assessing the changing status of women is that gains in life expectancy were greater for females than for males in most countries. This is indicated by the rising female-to-male ratios shown in the right-hand panel of Table 11, especially in South and Southeast Asia. It can also be seen in the average per-decade increase in years of life expectancy at birth for the three subregions:

	Female/male		
	Females	Males	ratio
South Asia	4.4	3.2	1.4
Southeast Asia	4.7	4.4	1.1
East Asia	2.8	2.7	1.0

In East Asia, the greater gain in life expectancy for females than for males may reflect the greater inherent frailty of males. In this region, where the risks of dying in infancy and childhood have been low for some time, it is the aging of populations that produces the widen-

Table 11. Years of life expectancy at birth for females and males, and female-to-male ratio of life expectancy, by year and country: Asia, recent decades

Subregion and country	Females			Males			Female/male ratio		
	1970	1980	1992	1970	1980	1992	1970	1980	1992
South Asia									
Bangladesh	47	50	54	50	52	55	0.95	0.96	0.99
India	47	52	58	48	53	57	0.97	0.98	1.01
Nepal	38	44	51	41	46	51	0.93	0.96	0.99
Pakistan	49	52	58	50	52	56	0.97	1.00	1.02
Sri Lanka	65	71	74	62	67	69	1.04	1.06	1.08
Southeast Asia									
Indonesia	45	55	62	42	52	58	1.06	1.06	1.07
Malaysia	62	67	71	59	62	66	1.06	1.08	1.09
Philippines	62	65	68	56	60	62	1.11	1.08	1.09
Thailand	62	66	72	55	61	65	1.12	1.08	1.10
East Asia									
China	63	67	69	60	65	67	1.05	1.03	1.03
Hong Kong	76	78	84	68	72	76	1.11	1.09	1.09
Japan	77	79	81	72	73	76	1.07	1.07	1.08
South Korea	68	69	73	62	63	67	1.10	1.10	1.10
Singapore	72	74	78	66	69	73	1.10	1.08	1.07
Taiwan	71	74	78	66	69	72	1.08	1.07	1.09

Sources: Asian Development Bank (1993a, table 1); for Japan: United Nations (1992, 104).

Note: Reference years for individual countries may vary slightly from those indicated. Specific qualifications are available from the first author upon request.

Table 12. Percentage of total population, ages 65 and over, and female-to-male ratio of population, ages 65 and over, by year and country: Asia, recent decades

Subregion country	% of total population 65+				F/M ratio of population 65+			
	1960	1970	1980	1992	1960	1970	1980	1992
South Asia								
Bangladesh	4	4	3	3	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.9
India	3	4	4	4	1.0	1.2	1.0	1.1
Nepal	4	3	3	3	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Pakistan	4	3	3	4	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.0
Sri Lanka	4	4	4	5	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.0
Southeast Asia								
Indonesia	3	3	3	3	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.2
Malaysia	3	3	4	4	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.2
Philippines	3	3	3	4	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.1
Thailand	3	3	4	4	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.3
East Asia								
China	5	4	5	6	1.2	0.9	0.8	1.2
Hong Kong	3	4	6	10	2.3	2.3	1.6	1.3
Japan	6	7	9	12	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.5
South Korea	3	3	4	5	1.8	1.4	1.7	1.7
Singapore	2	3	5	6	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.2
Taiwan	u	5	6	7	u	1.2	0.6	0.9

Sources: ESCAP (1992, 187); Asian Development Bank (1993a, 118–119); United Nations (1993).

u—data are unavailable.

ing female survival advantage. In contrast, in South Asia, female-to-male ratios below 1.0 prior to 1980 or 1992 suggest that the greater gain in female than in male survival represents improved nutrition or medical care for women and girls. Either there has been a lessening of traditional forms of nutritional and medical discrimination against girls (see, e.g., Chen, Huq, and D'Souza 1981) or maternal mortality has declined—or both. The data in Table 11 thus suggest that in South Asia especially and in parts of Southeast Asia as well, the health status of women and their survival prospects have improved during the past two decades.

Although development may enhance the health and survival of women, both in absolute terms and relative to men, it brings with it new problems for women. One such problem is suggested by Table 12, which shows the percentage of the total population aged 65 and over along with the ratio of women to men in this age group. As can be seen for many of the South and East Asian countries, as longevity increases, the ratio of older women to older men rises. In modern, low-fertility, low-mortality populations, this shift eventually results in a large proportion of older women without spouses.

Thus, whereas the enhanced survival of females relative to males in South Asia represents an improvement in the status of women, the enhanced survival of women in East Asia may mean the loss of support or companionship for them in old age. Given the choice of longevity and widowhood or death at an early age, however, most women would probably choose the former. Greater awareness that they are likely to end their days as widows may cause women to strive for greater economic independence. It may also, however, strengthen their preference for sons, the topic to which we turn next.

SEX PREFERENCES FOR CHILDREN

A strong preference for sons has characterized much of South and East Asia in the past and is associated with excess female mortality during childhood (Klasen 1994). Even where son preference does not lead to the neglect or outright killing of infant girls, it serves as a general indicator of the value placed on males versus females, a value that typically is correlated with the resources and power enjoyed by each gender. Women's sex preferences for children, which fertility surveys frequently measure, thus form a general indicator of the extent of gender inequality in a society. For this reason, we end our review of the changing status of women in Asia with an examination of sex-preference data collected in the mid-to-late 1970s.

Table 13 shows one measure of such preferences, namely, the sex of the next child that women would prefer. (This measure is shown only for women who were married and biologically capable of having more children and who said they would like to have another child.) The ratio of the percentages saying they wanted the next child to be a boy to the percentages saying they wanted the next child to be a girl are shown in the right-hand column of the table. In all but one of the countries for which data are available (the Philippines being the exception), the ratio is above 1.0, indicating a preference for sons. As has been noted in other sources, the ratios are generally higher in South and East Asia than in Southeast Asia, where most of the ratios are fairly close to 1.0. Sri Lanka, however, has a ratio more in line with the ratios found in Southeast Asia than with those found in South and East Asia.

We do not know whether these ratios have changed over time, nor do we know the extent to which they are affected by development or by demographic change.

The strong preference for sons found in South Korea, however, suggests that neither development nor a decline of fertility to modern levels necessarily weakens a society's preference for sons. Couples in Korea have small families *despite* their strong preference for sons, rather than having weakened son preference because of their desire to have small families (Park and Cho 1995). Son preference appears to reflect a country's sociocultural landscape rather than its economic level. Thus, although development in Asia may have improved the lot of women in several key respects, in South and East Asia women still face considerable disadvantages accruing from the mere fact that they were born female.

Table 13. Preferences for the sex of the next child and ratio of preferences for sons versus daughters among currently married, fecund women wanting another child, by country: Asia, 1970s (World Fertility Survey data)

Subregion and country	Preference (%)			Preference ratio ^a
	Boy	Girl	Undecided	
South Asia				
Bangladesh	60	8	32	3.3
India	u	u	u	u
Nepal	67	8	25	4.0
Pakistan	72	5	23	4.9
Sri Lanka	52	31	17	1.5
Southeast Asia				
Indonesia	34	29	36	1.1
Malaysia	36	28	35	1.2
Philippines	34	37	29	0.9
Thailand	49	34	16	1.4
East Asia				
China	u	u	u	u
Hong Kong	u	u	u	u
Japan	u	u	u	u
Korea, South	67	14	19	3.3
Singapore	u	u	u	u
Taiwan	u	u	u	u

Source: United Nations (1987, table 36, p. 6).

u—data are unavailable.

a. Ratio of women preferring a son to women preferring a daughter, with those undecided allocated equally.

CONCLUSIONS

This report has taken a selective approach to assessing the situation of women in Asia. We have focused on only a few of the many possible facets of women's status that might be considered and have examined them for selected countries rather than for the entire region. Moreover, primarily because of data limitations, we have been able to examine change for only a restricted period of time and, in the case of sex preferences for children, at only a single point in time. Despite these limitations, the data examined suggest two conclusions about the underlying causes of women's situation. First, the sociocultural traditions of a particular region or country can have a strong and enduring impact on women's situation, regardless of economic or political conditions. And second, economic development clearly improves the situation of women in certain respects, even if not in others.

The first of these conclusions is illustrated on one hand by the case of South Korea, where son preference persists despite rapid economic development, and on the other by the case of Sri Lanka, which stands out among South Asian countries by virtue of the advanced position of women on several of the indicators examined here. Sri Lanka's level of economic development is close to that found in the other South Asian countries. In 1991, for example, the World Bank estimated that per capita income in Sri Lanka, in US dollars, was \$500, as compared with \$400 in Pakistan and \$330 in India (Asian Development Bank 1993b, 15). These levels contrasted with far higher levels in many Southeast and East Asian countries—for example, \$2,490 in Malaysia, \$1,580 in Thailand, \$13,200 in Hong Kong, and \$6,340 in South Korea. Sheer development or wealth therefore cannot explain the far lower level of illiteracy, far higher

female-to-male ratio of school enrollment, older age at marriage, greater life expectancy at birth, and weaker son preferences of women in Sri Lanka compared with those of women in other South Asian countries. Women in Sri Lanka are better off, both in absolute terms and relative to men in their country, because of sociocultural traditions that accord them a more equal position than is given to women in the northerly portions of South Asia.

Economic development, however, does appear to affect the situation of women in many Asian countries, or at least is contemporaneous with changes in their status. For example, the enormous disparities in education and employment between the northerly countries of South Asia and the other countries examined here can be attributed at least in part to the disparity in incomes between subregions. A majority of the changes in women's status associated with development reviewed here have been positive. Both in comparisons between richer and poorer countries within the region and in comparisons over time within a single country, development goes along with an improved educational status for women, both absolutely and relative to men; with a movement of women out of unpaid family employment into remunerative work; with an older age at marriage for women and a narrowing age difference between spouses; and with improvements in women's health and longevity—improvements that in some instances are suggestive of decreasing nutritional or medical discrimination against girls.

Development, however, especially during its early stages, is no guarantee that women's position will improve. This review has noted much slower improvements in female education and employment in most of South Asia than in most of Southeast and East Asia, where incomes have risen more substantially.

It should also be kept in mind that as societies become wealthy and demographically modern, new problems for women arise to replace the old ones. For example, when fertility declines, although population growth slows, the proportion of the population that is old also grows and eventually becomes quite large (one-fifth or more of the total population). Because of men's greater biological frailty, this aging of the population normally involves an increasing feminization of the aged. Therefore, as economic development proceeds, problems of illiteracy and lack of earning power may abate for younger women, but problems of support for older women are likely to grow.

Nevertheless, development appears to have several salutary effects on the situation of women, even if it fails to guarantee them equality with men or improvements in all spheres of life. In most parts of Asia except the most backward, women today appear to be better off than their counterparts of 20–30 years ago and also better off in relation to men. One can only hope that as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and other relatively poor South Asian countries with strong patriarchal traditions experience further economic growth and demographic modernization, the women in those countries will increasingly enjoy improved education, employment opportunities, and health.

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