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# Gender Situation in Urban Environmental Management in Southeast Asia

Kyoko Kusakabe

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## Introduction

The urban population has been steadily increasing in Southeast Asia. During the 1980s, the urban population was 40% of the total population in the Philippines, which increased to nearly 60% in 2001. In Cambodia, the ratio of urban population has doubled since the 1980s from 10% to nearly 20%. With this rapid increase in urban population, environmental management issues are becoming significantly important.

Women as workers, housekeepers, mothers and migrants experience urbanization and degradation of urban environment in different ways from men (Momsen, 2004). Gender differences and gender relations differentiate the impact of deteriorating urban environment between women and men. Gender differences also discriminate women and men's access to urban services. Hence, it is important to understand the different experiences and needs of women and men in urban environmental management (UEM). However, there is still little recognition that gender differences and gender power relations play a large role in UEM, which is manifested in very scanty references to gender issues in urban environmental policies and programs in this region. In a way, recognition of the importance of taking gender perspectives is increasingly being recognized by many, but still statistics/ information/ data are grimly lacking in this field, and few projects give adequate recognition of the problem and challenges in gender inequality.

Recognizing this lacuna in information and knowledge, the Southeast Asia Urban Environmental Management and Applications (SEA-UEMA) Project has undertaken gender situation analysis in 11 cities of the region. This monograph is based on the gender scenario in the different cities. The objectives of the gender situation analysis were to:

- (1) Have an overview of the gender equality situation in the country/ city specifically focusing on the three urban environmental sectors (air pollution, solid waste management, and water and sanitation);
- (2) Review the availability of existing statistics and information on the issue; and
- (3) Identify emerging gender equality issues in urban environmental management in the region.

The studies were based on secondary information. In some cities, where secondary information is too scarce, small primary data collections were carried out.

Based on the analysis, gender equality issues in UEM in Southeast Asia can be summarized as in figure 1. Gender relations in the region is largely determined by:

- (1) gender division of labor;
- (2) access to and control over resources; and
- (3) status of women in household and society.

Inequalities in these three areas are maintained by what Kabeer calls “rules” for carrying out various activities (Kabeer, 1999).

Gender relations that are determined by the above factors establish further:

- (1) gender differentiated impacts from deterioration in urban environment;
- (2) gender distinguished access to urban environment related services; and
- (3) gender differentiated motivation and ability to make changes.

In the following paragraphs, these factors will be discussed in detail based on the gender situation analysis.

### **Gender differentiated impacts from deteriorating urban environment**

Gender situation analysis in this monograph showed that 48% of the population in Ho Chi Minh City is affected by flooding. In Dili, East Timor, only 43.8% of the populations have access to safe sanitation, and 80% of the children have intestinal parasitic infections and other diseases. Inadequate sewage system leads to mosquito-borne diseases and contaminated well-water. Environmental pollution and lack of sanitation leads to health risks whereby both women and men are at risk with such environmental degradation. In addition, women are further burdened since most of the time they are the caretakers of the sick in the household. Having children with asthma, and children and elderly suffering from diarrhea will often require mothers to stay home to look after the unwell members depriving them the opportunities to earn a suitable income.

As a result of the gender division of labor, poor women and men are exposed to different types of pollution. Women working as home-based workers can be affected by the industrial processes involved in the production. Traffic police are often men, and are vulnerable to air pollution. Street vendors, mostly women, who make their living along busy streets, are impacted by the emissions and dust.

Women and men are socially assigned to do various tasks and are expected to behave differently. Thus they are in diverse types of occupation with varied roles and responsibilities that create gender differentiated exposure to risks. For example, in solid waste management, women are often the pickers/collectors of waste, while men are mostly transporters<sup>1</sup>. Thus women are more vulnerable to exposure to waste, and hence require improved protection and training in handling waste.

Among the boat-people in Vietnam, both women and men often work in water for the whole day and polluted water causes serious health problems. Women are more vulnerable because of their reproductive functions and their reproductive health can be affected by being inundated in polluted water.

Vulnerability to pollution is often manifested by class issue as the poor are less able to protect themselves against pollution. Many poor women and men have no choice but

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<sup>1</sup> Ibadan City in Nigeria, showed a division of labor in biomedical waste handling. Women sweep and collect waste, while men transport it. This showed that women directly handled the biomedical waste, and thus were exposed to higher risks. They were not effectively trained to manage these risks of contamination (Urban Management Programme, 2001).

to work in polluted areas. It is, however, noted that women often command less resources than men, especially poor female-headed households in urban areas, and are often in a less competent position to protect them.

### **Gender differentiated access to urban environment related services**

Gender situation analysis of Manila showed that 33% of the population is living without potable water, and 29% without sanitary toilet facilities. In Dili, only 30% of the households have piped water, and more than 10% fetch water from unprotected sources. Lack of access to potable water is a serious problem in Dili, with 94% of women ranking access to clean water as the most important need. In Hanoi, people require to buy water from vendors for which the monthly expenditure can be up to 100,000 VND<sup>2</sup> (US\$ 6.25). Since a waste picker's daily income is 20,000 - 30,000 D per day, this cost of water is too expensive for the poor. The gender analysis in Surabaya, Indonesia, showed that only 24.5% of the respondents had piped water connection. It took 30 minutes for women on an average to fetch water everyday, with some respondents spending up to 60 minutes. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, solid waste collection services reach only 25% of the households.

Lack of access to urban sanitation services has a larger toll on women. The financial and time resources needed to acquire water as well as manage solid waste are often considered as women's responsibilities as they fetch water and manage solid waste. Women are often the financial manager of the household, and thus any extra expenditure to buy water makes it more difficult for them to manage their household, often leading to working extra hours or spending less for themselves. In the Philippines, people tend to use contaminated water once the regular water supply has been suspended due to non-payment (Rivera-Santander, 2004 in Interagency task force on gender and water, 2005). As water collectors, women and girls are often affected more in these cases (ibid). Not only in terms of money and time, but also in terms of sense of security, women's needs for urban environmental services are important. In Surabaya, 66.6% of the respondents were using river banks for toilet and river water for bathing leading to a sense of insecurity among women.

Based on the gender division of labor and the imbalance in workload and benefits, women and men have different needs to support themselves for what they do to make it better and easier. In Karachi, Pakistan, women were often more concerned about sanitation than their husbands, and have been able to persuade their reluctant husbands to pay their share of low-cost sanitation component (Fong, Wakeman and Bhushan, 1996).

Not only women have bigger needs of urban environmental services as well as different needs from men, they also have greater difficulty in accessing them. Women normally have less education than men, get lesser opportunities to improve their skills and on an average receive less wage than men. Often they are secluded into female-dominated works, have less opportunities to or are not expected to travel, and normally do not own the family land.

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<sup>2</sup> 16000 Vietnamese Dong (VND) = 1 US\$

These gender differences in possession of resources (human, physical, financial, social, etc.) have consequences to their access to urban services. As they are less educated or are expected to stay more at home, they have lesser access to information as well as social connections. Lack of resources also leads to their lower ability to purchase/ pay for these services. This is not only for women alone, but also poor households of both women and men have difficulties in paying for services especially when facing fee hikes of service provision under privatization schemes.

However, it should also be noted that female-headed households are increasing in many cities of the region. In many cases, in urban areas, female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households. In Penang, Malaysia, incidence of poverty was higher among female-headed households (16%) when compared to male headed households (7.5%)<sup>3</sup>.

In some cities, immigration has been increasingly over the years. Both women and men immigrants have difficulty in accessing urban services. Some rural to urban migrants still have their household registrations in rural areas, making it difficult for them to claim rights to amenities in the place of actual residence. In Thailand, without a household registration, one cannot access the 30-baht universal health service. For emigrants of different nationalities, difficulties are obvious. Lack of citizenship for these migrant workers deprives them of accessing even minimum health services. Women migrants are in some cases more vulnerable, as some followed their husbands to the urban areas for economic reasons. For example, the Burmese migrant workers have the men registered while the women and children are not as the registration fee is too high to afford and only one of them registers, normally the man.

### **Gender differentiated motivation and ability to make changes**

Based on the expected roles and responsibilities of women and men in the households and society, women and men play different roles in improving urban environment. When activities are introduced in the community, different work gets assigned to diverse people. Since women often play greater roles in voluntary community work, if there is any new unpaid voluntary community work especially as an extension of household chores, it will be given to the women. This means an increased unpaid workload for women though they will benefit from the improved environment, which is equally enjoyed by everyone in the community. This is a free rider problem. Women normally accommodate such unequal share of community work as a good mother and wife as well as a good citizen, which they feel/ consider as their duty. However, it should be recognized that there is a limit to the amount of work that women can accommodate. Therefore, there is need for all people in the community to share unpaid community as well as household works, so that everyone can appreciate one another's contribution.

In urban environmental management, there are often conscious efforts to generate income from the waste management activities. From recycling projects, normally the income generated goes to the hands of women. Whereas on the other hand, in a project that is more technical, such as installing wastewater treatment facilities or composting, the income is generally made by men, who work as technicians. In such

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<sup>3</sup> Gender situation analysis Penang.

cases, women are seen as uninvolved, even though they may be engaged in carrying out other supportive jobs, like ditch cleaning and contribution collection, and hence are unpaid. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that all those involved get fair recognition for their work. At the same time, considering the general poverty among female-headed households in urban areas, and women's limited occupational choices and lower wages than men, it is important to give a stronger emphasis in creating jobs and incomes for women.

Due to the socially accepted roles of women, it is often observed that women's knowledge on urban environment is not appreciably acknowledged. As a result of the division of labor, women and men acquire different kind of knowledge and skill. For example, women are well aware of the condition of collection points of waste and the composition of domestic waste better than men since they go to dispose the waste. In upper and middle class neighborhoods, it is the domestic workers who will be more knowledgeable about the condition of communal waste facilities. Therefore, for solid waste management activities, involvement of women and domestic workers is essential. In the case of air pollution, mothers who have asthmatic children might be more sensitive to air quality than others. All these show the importance of understanding from women's knowledge of environment. Even though women have adequate knowledge and larger roles to play in environmental management, they are often deprived of opportunities to participate in decision making process of UEM.

In all the countries of the region, women in general occupy lower status than men as they are less involved in decision-making processes in public places. Their representation in decision-making bodies is generally low. As an example, the gender situation analysis in Yogyakarta showed that in the municipal council, only 2.5% of the representatives were women.

Women's lower status is manifested and maintained through violence against them which prevails. It is often used to 'discipline' women to keep them in their place and create fear of deviating from the expected norms set by their menfolks. In Yogyakarta, 63% of the households experienced wife battering, and the situation is worse for full-time housewives. This indicates that if women are economically dependent on their husbands, their choices are limited and have no option but to continue in a damaging relationship. In East Timor, 50% of women experienced violence in the past one year, but only 15% of the cases were reported. It shows that the figures are just a tip of an iceberg, while the actual problem might be more serious.

Gender situation analysis showed that women's groups have often been successful in managing community based solid waste and recycling projects. It is important to acknowledge such activities not only as an extension of women's unpaid household work, but also as a valuable contribution to urban environmental management that would otherwise need to be taken up by the government. Such recognition should not end up only in lip services but requires taking more material forms.

### **Gender perspectives in UEM**

When referring to gender perspectives in UEM, first of all, one needs to identify all the above-mentioned issues to:

- (1) Recognize the gender differentiated roles/ contributions/ constraints;
- (2) Meet gender needs that emerge from various roles, access to resources and status of women: One is required to check whether the needs of women and men have been differentiated, and both are able to meet both of their requirements. One should also check whether any of the interventions is making things worse such as: Are women getting overburdened without any remuneration? Are women losing access to services that got before? Are women's income generating opportunities and employment hampered/ affected by the intervention? Has the intervention supported women's income generating activities or suppressed it?
- (3) Take proactive measures to improve women's status: One needs not only to check whether things get worse, but should also explore whether the interventions are proactively contributing to the advancement of women and their status in the society. That is, one should explore whether women benefit from / contribute to UEM, and also whether UEM is contributing to the betterment of women's well-being and social status.

In order to implement the above, it is a prerequisite to have:

- (1) Better data and information: There is hardly any gender disaggregated statistics at the municipality level. It is a prerequisite to advocate for the collection of gender disaggregated statistics in order to better understand gender equality situation in the municipality.
- (2) Make gender analysis a routine activity in all organizations and interventions. It is often seen as a special activity for a project. It should be a routine task together with appraisal and evaluation as well as monitoring.
- (3) Listening to women and promoting women in management and decision making: Involving women and men equally in the intervention especially in decision making is imperative for a balanced intervention. One should not have any assumption that men or women in other class/age/ethnicity understand other groups of people and be sensitive to differences in circumstances.
- (4) Create forum and opportunities to discuss gender equality issues at all levels: Gender equality is not about counting the number of women and men coming to meetings and training. Gender equality issues require thorough and deeper thinking and re-examination of urban environmental management issues. Thus, one should create more opportunities for discussions such that the understanding can widen on gender equality issues in urban environmental management.

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Figure 1: Gender equality in urban environmental management

