

LABOUR

Less work, pay for women, but better than other Asians

1997 crisis shrunk gender gap, says ILO

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There is less and less work for women in Thailand and they are well behind men on the pay scale, but still do well compared with other Asians, the International Labour Organisation reports.

Time for Equality at Work, a global ILO report out today, provides details of the differences.

Singaporean women fared best among the selected Asian countries, while Pakistanis fared worst.

The report says the 1997 financial crisis pushed Thai women to take up new occupational skills, notably computer programming and "commercial cooking."

About 48% of Thai women who changed occupations in 2000 went into computer programming or systems analysis, narrowing the gap in participation of men and women in this sector, the report said. There were no figures

for commercial cooking. "Prior to the 1997 economic crisis, the skills that women tended to learn in public and private training institutions reproduced gender stereotypes and strengthened sex segregation," the report said, citing child and elderly care, traditional Thai massage, office assistance and hotel maid services.

Thailand, the report adds, is trying to address the problem of homeworkers, who are "invisible", paid low rates and irregularly, and receive no social insurance benefits.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare set up an Office of Homeworkers and the eighth national economic and social development plan (1997-2001) included a policy to protect and promote domestic helpers.

The "Chiang Mai homenet" is helping to make this group more visible but more research was needed.

Though the 136-page report dwells largely on gender inequalities, it does not neglect other forms of discrimination, including those based on racial, cultural, ethnic and religious differences.

Racial discrimination was recognised as the first form of discrimination in the 1920s and continued to preoccupy the international community through the 1950s and 1960s, the report says. Racism, it adds, "still is at the heart of the most outrageous social tragedies."

Discrimination at work for people living with HIV/Aids is a new challenge exacerbated by co-workers' lack of knowledge of the illness and employers' concerns about extra costs, the report said.

"Fear, ignorance and the prejudices surrounding the illness, and a lack of information about the prevention and the transmission of the virus are at the heart of discrimination at work.

"Concerns with the cost that employing an HIV-positive worker may entail, in terms of a decline in productivity and increases in labour costs, also play an important role," the report said.

The media should address discrimination by resisting the tendency to represent stereotypes of social groups.

"Once a negative discourse misrepresenting migrants or ethnic minorities is established, it tends to prevail," the

report said. "These negative representations are not adequately compensated by positive images such as the cultural contribution of migrants and other minorities," it adds.

An effective way forward, says the report, requires changing social concepts, reforming institutions, and harnessing political will.

A plan of action also should focus on strengthening knowledge of different forms of discrimination, advocacy directed at decision-makers and support for legislation and an institutional framework, it adds.

"It could be said that the true test of an equal opportunity policy is the way it succeeds in addressing pay inequalities," the report says.

"Campaigns should be directed at political decision-makers, in particular parliamentarians, local community groups and opinion leaders," it adds.

A human rights based approach is vital to the achievement of freedom from discrimination, which would advance development and poverty alleviation, the report says.