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Pandemic fallout hampers women's sport in Asia

Optimistic growth forecasts threatened as men's games are given priority.

By John Duerden

Nikkei Asia (10.12.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/382tjLx> - This year started promisingly for women's sport in the Asia-Pacific. On March 8, more than 86,000 people crammed into the Melbourne Cricket Ground to watch Australia defeat India in the final of the Women's T20 World Cup.

India loves cricket, and was starting to take more notice of women's events. "Women's cricket was thriving in early 2020," said Vishal Yadav, founder of Female Cricket, a Mumbai academy dedicated to helping people achieve their dreams in the popular game.

"Overall, there was massive progress as they geared up for the World Cup in Australia," Yadav said. "There was a massive crowd there with lots of Indian fans. Domestic cricket was moving forward, and there was optimism."

If women's cricket was starting to go places in India, the same can be said of women's soccer in Indonesia. Esti Lestari, the chairwoman of Women's Football Network Indonesia, was helping the game to grow in the soccer-mad country.

The founder of Persija Kartini, Indonesia's first professional female team, established in 2016, Lestari also helped to found a new professional league, Liga 1 Putri, in 2019. "We started the league for women last year, and everything was positive," she said. "We were not flush with sponsors, but it was sustainable and all the clubs finished the season."

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, however, the 2020 season has not yet started for Indonesian women's soccer and many other sports around the region. The Women's T20 World Cup cricket final was one of the last major international sporting events to take place before COVID-19 brought sport around the world to a halt earlier this year.

By August, some sports were returning. There may have been no tennis fans in New York to watch the U.S. Open women's singles final on Sept. 12, but millions tuned in on TV to watch Japan's Naomi Osaka, the world's top-rated player, beat Victoria Azarenka of

Belarus. In golf, Kim Sei-young continued South Korea's domination of the women's game on Oct. 11 by winning the Women's PGA Championship in the United States to collect \$645,000 in prize money.

In other sports, however, especially team games such as soccer, cricket and rugby, women have often had to watch the men restart while their own sports have remained in abeyance. That could threaten the future of some -- including sports that were riding a wave of optimism before the pandemic began. Earlier this year, for example, the global association representing professional soccer players warned that the economic effects of the coronavirus would affect female players more than their male equivalents.

"The lack of written contracts, the short-term duration of employment contracts, the lack of health insurance and medical coverage, and the absence of basic worker protections and workers' rights leaves many female players -- some of whom were already teetering on the margins -- at great risk of losing their livelihoods," said the organization, known as FIFPRO.

In India, women's cricket has taken a huge hit, both on and off the field and at the international and domestic levels. "There is a vast difference in the pay scale between male and female cricketers," said Yadav. "Therefore, the female players are left with fewer or sometimes no resources to fight back against such unforeseen economic adversities."

With a population of nearly 270 million, Indonesia has huge potential in global soccer. But it is not clear whether its nascent professional women's league can continue after the interruption caused by the pandemic -- in part because of the greater priority given to restarting the men's game.

"We are back to where we were before. I don't think there will be a league this year. After the pandemic, women's football became less and less of a priority," said Lestari. "Men's football was given priority in getting games playing again."

Lestari added that financial assistance from the Indonesian government and the Football Federation of Indonesia is "crucial" to keep women's professional clubs alive. "They must assist or next year 260 players will have no team," she said.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel. The cost of running women's sport in team games such as soccer, rugby and cricket is far lower than for men's sport, which makes entry costs for corporate sponsors more attractive.

"The cost of entry to support women's sport is much less at the moment," Steve Martin, global chief executive of the M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment agency, part of the U.K.-based M&C Saatchi Group, told SportsPro Media, a London-based sports media organization.

Martin added that if his marketing and sponsorship budget were halved, he would reconsider his options. "I maybe can't put all of that 50% into men's sport, so I'll be looking at the deals I have in place and looking at the opportunity in women's sport because I think it can be very cost-effective."

Women's sport in Asia should also benefit from the impact of major sporting events in the region over the next few years, including the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021 and the Women's World Cup soccer finals in Australia and New Zealand in 2023. If the soccer tournament goes ahead as planned it will be the first to be staged in the southern hemisphere, and the first to feature 32 teams -- up from 24 at the 2019 tournament in France and double the number that competed as recently as 2011.

"We have some great opportunities," said Moya Dodd, a former Australian international soccer player. "Everyone in sport is struggling with the uncertainty of COVID right now, but in Asia we have the two most important world tournaments right here, in the next three years. That gives us a comparative advantage. I hope we can use that to boost fan interest, media reach and commercial value."

Dodd said that planning for the resumption of women's sports should be given the same priority by administrators and governments as the comparable men's games, and called for long-term changes to strengthen women's competitions in the wake of the short-term pain inflicted by the pandemic.

"As old habits are broken, we should look to rebuild sport with the equality that we want to see for future generations," she said.

International Women's Day: Meet 11 of Asia's trailblazers

From leading Netflix's India ambitions to funding the next unicorn, these are the names to know.

Nikkei Asian Review (04.03.2020) - <https://s.nikkei.com/2IkKzPs> - Despite progress over the past few decades, women in Asia still face significant, structural barriers to success. Ahead of International Women's Day 2020, Nikkei Asian Review has selected 11 inspiring female leaders in business, politics, activism and the arts -- pathbreaking women who are driving change.

Denise Ho Wan-See, Hong Kong (singer and activist)

In the sea of masked, black-clad protesters rallying on the streets of Hong Kong, there is always a familiar face in the crowd. Cantonese pop diva Denise Ho Wan-see has been at the forefront of Hong Kong's fight for freedom since the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997.

Her participation in the "Umbrella Movement" in 2014 -- a 79-day mass sit-in to call for universal suffrage -- came at a huge personal cost. She has since been banned in the lucrative mainland China market, dropped from sponsorship deals and even by her record label.

Six years on, the 42-year-old Ho is now a prominent ambassador for Hong Kong's leaderless democracy movement. As street protests rumbled across the city last year, she went on a global tour to speak on behalf of her comrades at home, giving speeches at a host of conferences overseas, including the Oslo Freedom Forum, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

"The main message I want to deliver is that Hong Kong protesters are actually in a global fight for universal values," Ho told the Nikkei Asian Review. "This is a fight against suppression and censorship, which are also spreading to more and more old democracies. Therefore we should all stand with Hong Kong."

Ho is outspoken not only on the political front: In 2012 she became the first mainstream singer in Hong Kong to come out publicly as a lesbian. Her advocacy of LGBT rights in the sexually conservative society has made her a frequent target of hate speech.

"There have been many personal attacks based on my gender and sexual orientation," she recalled, "and people would undermine my words because of that. ... But it will only make me speak louder. It's horrendous. How ridiculous when people believe that [sexual orientation] is something they can attack you [for] in 2020."

It is an encouraging trend that women are taking an increasingly vocal role in social movements, Ho said. But speaking out can come at a price. She spoke of her friend Mai Khoi, a Vietnamese singer whose songs often center on resistance and women's rights, and who resorted to underground performances after becoming an enemy of the government.

"It is devastating to see what my friend is going through," she said. "I imagine this is an equally difficult fight for many out there, especially those from repressive countries where women are not supposed to speak up."

Democratic rights -- including people's right to choose their leaders -- are essential for promoting gender equality, Ho argues, citing rights for sexual minorities as an example.

She said LGBT rights in Hong Kong have not advanced at all since she came out eight years ago, while in Taiwan, where the government is democratically elected, same-sex marriage has been legalized.

"This is exactly why we need to fight for democracy and a system in which everyone's voice is well-represented," Ho said. "It is not just about gender rights, but also human rights and all kinds of rights people think they deserve."

For now, Ho is juggling the arduous work of activism with her artistic career. She is in the process of producing a new album, which has been on hold for the past months due to the prolonged protests. Meanwhile, her advocacy is about to embark on a new phase, with Yale University and the Women in the World Summit in New York as her next destinations.

"International interest in Hong Kong is still high, even though the protests are not as high-energy nowadays due to the [coronavirus] outbreak," she said. "The sentiment is definitely staying, and I am almost sure that things are going to pick up again once the right timing comes."

While street battles have quietened down, Ho believes it is "not only what's happening on the streets that counts," but more importantly, how people "live that spirit in daily lives."

Music is one of the ways to pass on the spirit, Ho said. As she composes new songs inspired by the pursuit of freedom, she hopes that people around the globe, especially women, can gain the courage to speak up and speak their minds.

"My words to these girl fighters are, please remember we are not alone in these fights," she said. "Although we don't know each other and might not ever see each other, we are fighting the same fight together."

(Reported: Michelle Chan)

Amina Sugimoto, Japan (co-founder and chief operating officer, Fermata)

Throughout her childhood, Amina Sugimoto moved around the world, first following her parents' work in international development and then as a student. She aspired to be a doctor, but during pre-med training she decided that she was just too squeamish to

practice medicine. Instead, she studied health care economics, obtaining a Ph.D. at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Returning to work in Japan again in her late 20s, Sugimoto, just like many other women, said that she felt the pressure to think about marriage, having children and building her career. She joined Mistletoe, a Japanese venture capital fund led by Taizo Son -- brother of SoftBank Group founder Masayoshi Son -- where she was introduced to the U.S. startup Modern Fertility, which offers home hormone tests that give women better insight into their fertility.

"I was not interested in feminism at all," Sugimoto said. "Our work is not really about spearheading feminism. It is more of, like, isn't it interesting to know a little bit more about your body?"

Looking into the emerging "femtech" field, she found that there was little appetite among existing investors. Venture capitalists, including those in Mistletoe, were predominantly male and "simply do not understand" the products that are about female bodies, she said. Even though the sector clearly has potential -- consultancy Frost and Sullivan predicts that the market could be worth \$50 billion by 2025 -- investors are still not backing startups. "They are waiting in line to see who would go first," Sugimoto said.

Sugimoto has set out to change that. Last year, along with co-founder Hiroko Nakamura, she set up Fermata, a community for femtech entrepreneurs and users. By November this year they will have moved into actively supporting startups with a new 2.5 billion yen (\$23.1 million) fund. Taizo Son is an early investor. The fund will look for investments across Asia, and attempt to seed a market that, Sugimoto said, does not yet exist -- in part because the subject of women's health often remains taboo.

"For [women's wellness and sexual wellness], problems are not verbalized because no one is talking about them," Sugimoto said. "Unless they are put into words and put into questions, people do not buy even the best product. What I mean is, there is no market."

(Reporter: Akane Okutsu)

Kao Chia-Yu, Taiwan (lawmaker)

When Kao Chia-yu began her 2009 bid to become a city councilor in Taipei, aged 29, she had no money, no support from within the Democratic Progressive Party of which she was a member, and no profile among voters. Rather than buying ads on buses, TV commercials and banners, like other candidates, she went out into the community, meeting voters at parks, markets and restaurants. She rang doorbell after doorbell, followed garbage trucks on their routes around the city and reached out through social media platforms. It was her third attempt at achieving public office, and, she said, it felt like her last chance.

"At that time, I was at the crossroads of my career," she told Nikkei. "Most of my classmates had become lawyers, prosecutors and judges. ... But I wanted to give myself a last try in my own way, as I really love to talk to people and help people solve problems."

Kao went on to win three consecutive council elections, and this year took a seat in the national legislature. Her star is still rising. With a national profile, she is viewed as one of the likely challengers for the post of Taipei City mayor in 2022, a position that is often a steppingstone to higher office. Her approach to engaging voters, mixing digital platforms with ground-level interactions -- such as livestreaming her breakfast at small cafes -- has been widely imitated.

Even though Taiwan has a relatively strong record of women's participation in politics -- 40% of lawmakers are female, the highest in Asia -- women still face cultural and social barriers to high office. Balancing family life with front-line politics is difficult, and there are choices to be made. Two powerful female politicians, President Tsai Ing-wen and Presidential Office Secretary-General Chen Chu, an activist who spent more than six years in prison, remain single. When seeking reelection, former New Power Party lawmaker Hung Tzu-yung was criticized by Foxconn Technology Group founder Terry Gou of being "busy with getting married and having a child" -- a criticism not faced by male politicians.

Kao has faced down critics from within the DPP over her lack of experience. Attempts to sideline and belittle her have been met with characteristically blunt straight-talk. She is still seen as an outsider, dubbed a "lone bird" -- a description she seems to embrace.

"I don't owe anyone any favors, but I also don't have anyone to count on," Kao told Nikkei. "I only have myself, as always."

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

Srishti Behl Arya, India (director for international original film, Netflix India)

On the cover of her MacBook, Srishti Behl Arya has a sticker that says: "On an adventure." Ever since she was brought on board by streaming giant Netflix to head international original film in India in May 2018, that has been her life.

"I have the best job in the whole world," she says. "I get to enable creators to tell the best stories of their lives on the best service they can."

That means that on any given day Behl Arya, 47, is wading through scripts, pitches, books, concepts, all the while looking to connect directors and storytellers. "India is a land of storytellers and we have the problem of plenty," she said.

India has 451 million active monthly internet users, the highest in the world after China, thanks to an explosion of cheap data and affordable smartphones. And Netflix, which launched in India in January 2016, is just one of 30 streaming platforms trying to draw some of those eyeballs. Video streaming service Amazon Prime, The Walt Disney Co.-owned Hotstar and homegrown platforms like Zee5 and ALTBalaji are some of the others in the race for viewers. Disney's streaming service Disney+ will be joining the fray on March 29.

In the past year alone, Behl Arya's unit -- which she co-leads with Aashish Singh -- has announced 17 films. For some of them, Behl Arya has turned to her Bollywood pedigree. The daughter, and granddaughter, of filmmakers -- she also ran a production house with her brother before joining Netflix -- Bollywood is home. For others, she's brought on new writers and directors.

Her mantra is to have "content for every mood," says Behl Arya. That requires "not just diversity of content, but diversity of minds, because that's how you get the real differentiation," she says. For that she has recruited two debutante female directors, three female producers, as well as many women writers who have created female protagonists. This is rare in an industry which has for decades been entirely controlled by men, and has rarely, if ever, told stories from a female perspective.

Behl Arya agrees that because she works at Netflix, she can "lean much more into risk." Bringing on board diverse voices, she said, "is a privilege. I use that word a lot, but I live in a lot of gratitude."

(Reporter: Megha Bahree)

Pocket Sun, China/U.S. (co-founder and managing partner, SoGal Ventures)

Pocket Sun's journey into venture capital began when she lost her job. Back in 2014, Sun, a Chinese native, fell afoul of the U.S. visa lottery and had to leave her job. She signed up for a master's degree program, thinking it would buy her time while she looked for a chance to get back into the corporate world.

As soon as she set foot in the University of Southern California to study entrepreneurship and innovation, she "felt out of place," she told Nikkei. Most of her classmates were male, as were the entrepreneurs who visited to share their experiences.

"Those male entrepreneurs were extraordinary people, but I just found it hard to connect with their stories," Sun said.

In search of like-minded female entrepreneurs, she founded the SoGal Foundation in late 2014, a "women for women" business community. What started out as a high-tea party in a classroom at USC has now become one of the largest businesswomen's networks in the world, counting more than 100,000 members.

In 2016, along with Elizabeth Galbut, Sun founded an investment fund, SoGal Ventures, to support women-led startups and to overcome the structural bias against women in the VC business. In 2019, female founders attracted less than 3% of all the VC investing in the U.S., according to industry information portal PitchBook.

At first, Sun used her own savings, working as a consultant and doing public speaking to make money, but was able to bootstrap \$14 million from outside investors. Although the size of their fund is small, Sun believes it can make a real difference in shaping the future of technology. For now, fewer than 10% of decision-makers at U.S. VC companies are women, according to a 2019 Axios analysis.

SoGal has backed 24 women-led startups so far, including a company making customized prosthetic breasts for cancer survivors, and another that supplies kits for rape victims to collect evidence at any time, sparing them from spending hours finding a designated clinic that runs the tests.

"Venture capitalists have a say on which technology would be developed, and how society is evolving," Sun said. "If this decision-making process is only led by one voice, it is unfair to the rest of the world."

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Li Yang, China (co-founder, Prop Roots Education Center)

Li Yang says that she is the mother of some 200 children. In 2009, after visiting Jingpo communities in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan with her husband, a Dutch linguist who was studying the Jingpo language, Li found herself drawn into the life of the indigenous group. A Beijing native, Li was impressed by the Jingpo children's knowledge of the natural world, and the depth of their culture. She also discovered a darker side to life.

Drug addiction has become rife in Dehong -- a border region a stone's throw from Myanmar, home to most of China's 150,000-strong Jingpo population -- and the community is in the midst of an identity crisis. They can no longer make a living with their centurieslong hunting tradition, but equally, they have been left behind in China's rapid march toward modernization. Li, who called the situation "heartbreaking," decided to take the matter into her own hands, and started Prop Roots Education Center, a nongovernmental organization that has supported 200 local children.

Every day, children come to a bamboo house in Yinping village to listen to stories, do their homework, and to prepare for urban life through training and roleplay. About 98% of the children Li taught have managed to stay away from drugs, while that figure is less than 50% in nearby villages. Li attributes the difference to her parenting role. "What rural children really need is not money, but our company," she said.

(Reporter: Coco Liu)

Garima Arora, Thailand (chef and co-owner, Restaurant Gaa)

Garima Arora moves quickly. By the age of 29, she had already left a career in journalism to work under the infamous Gordon Ramsay at Verre, then Noma's Rene Redzepi. By 32, her Thai-Indian fusion restaurant in Bangkok, Gaa, had garnered a Michelin star -- a first for an Indian woman -- and debuted on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list. That same year, she was also awarded the title of Asia's best female chef. Even so, "ambition doesn't have a gender," she told Nikkei.

A handful of women hold the prestigious tally of three Michelin stars, compared to over a hundred male chefs. "I don't think there's any conspiracy to keep women out of the kitchen ... but the truth is, it's very hard for them to stick around," said Arora. "At some point in their lives, they have to choose between working these crazy hours and having a family, and it's impossible to have both. Women are forced to make unrealistic choices."

In her childhood, Arora's father planted the seeds of an obsession with food, as he traveled for work as an event organizer and returned with exotic flavors for his Mumbai-based, Punjabi family. At Gaa, Arora plays with the boundaries of her native cuisine, her upcoming menu asking customers to eat with their hands as they move through five "feasts," from refined hawker fare to seafood.

The chef also ties her rise to lessons learned with Ramsay -- "humility" -- and Redzepi -- "food as an intellectual exercise" -- combined with an instinct to challenge. "I've carried my curiosity throughout my whole career. In everything that I do, I think about it and constantly question it."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Nicole Yap, Indonesia (managing director, Digitaraya)

Nicole Yap's parents moved from Indonesia to Canada before she was born. Although she had visited regularly, it wasn't until she took part in MIT's Global Startup Lab in 2013, teaching entrepreneurship at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia's Yogyakarta Province, that she began to think about the country's business potential. She returned to North America, working as a global health consultant in California, and spent some time in Nairobi at a social enterprise.

Then, during a trip to Indonesia in 2017, she saw that the landscape had changed completely. Ride-hailing startup Gojek had become a unicorn -- a private company valued at more than \$1 billion -- and the technology sector was buzzing.

"I feel that there are a lot more interesting problems to be solved here in Indonesia, and that tech and entrepreneurship and startups can do a lot more to actually solve these challenges," she said.

Along with her co-founder Yansen Kamto, Yap launched startup accelerator Digitalaya in 2018. Nearly 100 startups from 12 countries have participated in its programs to date. Digitalaya is the exclusive partner of both Google for Startups and Google Developers Launchpad in Indonesia, and is also a partner to UBS, Indonesia's ride-hailing giant Gojek, and largest private lender Bank Central Asia.

The accelerator's success has established Yap, 34, as a leading figure in a male-dominated industry. Aware that having a strong network is important for women, only a few of whom have senior positions in the industry, Digitalaya has established Simona Ventures, an accelerator program dedicated to women-led startups.

"We think ... having a community of women that they can actually share with, learn from, connect with is even more important in this industry," Yap said.

(Reporter: Erwida Maulia)

Eni Lestari, Indonesia/Kong Kong (chairperson, International Migrants Alliance)

Eni Lestari had always dreamed of going to university, but when the Asian financial crisis hit her native Indonesia, she had to abandon her studies and search for jobs overseas to bail her family out of debt.

Eni first arrived in Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper in 1999, only to find herself deprived of basic labor rights. "I was paid half of the minimum wage and no holiday was given," she said. "I didn't know anything about the regulations in Hong Kong, so it took months for me to find out I was actually tricked by my employer and the agency."

A friend introduced Eni to a nongovernmental organization offering legal aid and shelter to migrant workers. Living there, she volunteered to answer the counseling hotline; in doing so, she noticed that many helpers were facing similar ordeals in the city.

In 2000, she established the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and is now the chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance, a global association with more than 4,000 members. In 2016, she was chosen to address the first United Nations summit on refugees and migrants in New York. And this is only her side job -- she is still working as a helper on weekdays.

"Knowledge can be so empowering," she said. "In the past, some girls just cried to us and returned home doing nothing. Now, there is a community, both online and offline."

Eni said she hopes other helpers will not give up on learning and self-enrichment because of the nature of their jobs. "You'll never know your possibilities if you don't explore."

(Reporter: Michelle Chan)

Akiko Naka, Japan (founder and CEO, Wantedly)

Akiko Naka's career path, jumping from Goldman Sachs analyst to would-be manga artist to Facebook marketer, is not unthinkable for any hungry person in her early 30s. But in her home country of Japan, it has been wildly unorthodox. "For my grandparents, maybe

80% to 90% of them worked for a company. If you changed jobs, or quit, you were considered an outcast," said Naka.

For her peers, that is changing. Naka's job-matching platform, Wantedly, has signed up 34,000 companies, mostly small to midsize, and has a total user base of 4 million. Job posters do not mention salary -- instead, they advertise by vision and values, challenging the once-a-year-hiring, job-for-life model that undergirds Japan's rigid labor system. Wantedly, founded in 2010, first struggled with resistance from human resources departments that have gradually adopted the service; now, it is listed on the Mothers board for startups, where it has also seen ups and downs.

Fueled by a recent rise in domestic angel investors and venture capital, Naka's is among a small upswell of startups seeking to change the business models of century-old enterprises. "Historically, Japanese people -- we're not willing to make change until it starts to overflow," said Naka. "At some point it snaps, and you have to make change all at once."

(Reporter: Sarah Hilton)

Rossana Hu, China (founding partner, Neri & Hu)

Rossana Hu was born in the southern Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung and moved to the U.S. at the age of 12. After studying architecture and music at the University of California, Berkeley, and receiving a Master's degree in architecture and urban planning from Princeton University, she worked for major architecture companies in the U.S. before founding her own practice, Neri & Hu, with partner Lyndon Neri, in Shanghai in 2004.

"[A] client requested to have Lyndon's physical presence there for a short stay; the short stay led to a long stay, and we realized how much we would be able to contribute and be a part of an exciting era for Chinese architecture, so we made the move," she told Nikkei.

Neri & Hu has established itself as one of Asia's leading architecture and design practices, merging traditional Chinese design with modern touches. Hu and her partner are the masterminds behind the flagship store of South Korean skin-care brand Sulwhasoo in Seoul, Alila Bangsar, a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur, and the New Shanghai Theatre.

"Architecture has never been an easy profession for women," Hu said. Earlier in her career, she was often the only young woman working on projects. However, Neri & Hu has more senior female architects than men. "We have been blessed to not foster a biased working environment for the young staff in our office," she said.

(Reporter: Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li)

Gender equality and women leaders benefit companies and society: President Halimah

By Choo Yun Ting

The Straits Times (18.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IX2WIP> - Companies and society will benefit from increasing participation by women in the economy and leadership positions, said President Halimah Yacob on Wednesday (18.09.2019).

Madam Halimah told the Women's Forum Asia: "Our society has been built on principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity for all.

"To this extent, organisations in Singapore must continue to embrace diversity in leadership positions, which has been shown to lead to positive impact on business profitability, a more robust corporate governance, as well as fresh and innovative perspectives."

Madam Halimah noted that female representation on the boards of the top 100 primary-listed companies here has doubled in four years.

She also noted the potential for greater women's participation in entrepreneurship and science and technology, adding that the common misconception that women do not do well in these fields needs to be addressed.

Madam Halimah cited a study conducted with more than 1,000 Asian firms by the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group.

It found that companies where at least 30 per cent of the directors were females fared better than firms with all-male boards.

This presents a strong business case for increasing women's participation in both workplaces and on boards, Madam Halimah said.

Bursa Malaysia chairman Shireen Muhiudeen said during the opening discussion that new technology means more women could participate in the workforce, especially as it enables them to work from home.

"If you can do something via technology, why not... this would be one of the ways to keep women working and empowered, and part of the ecosystem," she said.

Speakers at the forum, which is focusing on the importance of female leadership in a changing world, include Ms Agnes Pannier-Runacher, French State Secretary for Economy and Finance, Schneider Electric chairman and chief executive Jean-Pascal Tricoire and former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi.

Around 120 speakers and 1,500 people are expected at the three-day forum, which ends on Friday (20.09.2019).

A new network to end FGM across Asia launched by ARROW & Orchid Project at Women Deliver

Arrow (03.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KFBRxM> - Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Asia will be addressed by the development of a new Asia Network to End FGM/C, across countries such as Brunei, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Malaysia, Maldives, Singapore and Thailand.

Malaysia-based regional feminist NGO, the Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), and British charity, Orchid Project have joined forces to support the development of the network, which they announced on Sunday (June 2) at Women Deliver in Vancouver, Canada.

FGM/C is practised in over 45 countries globally, but the global focus has not responded strongly enough to the situation in the Asia region. For example, in Indonesia 49% of girls have undergone FGM/C. UNFPA estimate that by 2030, a further 15 million girls in Indonesia will be cut if efforts to end the practice are not accelerated.

"FGM/C has for long been presented as a traditional practice with harmful consequences for girls and women primarily taking place in Africa," said Sivananthi Thanethiran, ED of Malaysia-based ARROW, a regional NGO advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and young people.

"What is lesser known is that there are many girls and women in Asia who are affected by the same practice. Because of the overall lack of advocacy in the region and pressure from the international community to end the practice in the region, governments continue to shy from taking measures to end FGM/C, which is in direct contradiction of a number of human rights commitments."

Once established, the network will actively lobby governments in the Asia Pacific to end the practice to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and specifically SDG target 5.3 which relates to ending FGM/C. According to UNICEF (2018), 3.9 million girls are at risk of FGM/C annually, and at least 200 million girls and women have been cut in 30 countries. However, this figure does not include many countries in Asia Pacific where FGM/C is known to take place, so the true scale of the problem is unknown because of these gaps in data.

The announcement of the Asia Network to End FGM/C follows the establishment of vibrant networks to end FGM/C in Europe, the US and most recently in Canada – where Women Deliver is taking place.

"The first step in this process is to invite organisations across the region to help shape the Asia Network to End FGM/C," said Ebony Riddell Bamber, Head of Advocacy & Policy at Orchid Project. "We will build a vibrant network in partnership with international organizations active on FGM/C in Asia, including Sahiyo and Equality Now, as well as grassroots organizations across the continent."

"Our goal is to create a platform to jointly advocate for change, and identify how best to support and amplify the great work underway at the grassroots to end FGM/C," Riddell Bamber added. "If we don't act now, many more girls across Asia will be subject to this harmful practice, and progress in ending FGM/C will be severely compromised." she added.

Community and media reports indicate that FGM/C is prevalent in many Asian and Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Philippines, Maldives, India and Pakistan.

The Asia Network to End FGM/C will establish a platform of NGOs, activists, and researchers across these countries to build stronger relationships and collaboration between organisations working across Asia. The platform will gather data and evidence on prevalence, take survivor needs and viewpoints into account, engage with religious scholars who can influence communities positively, and urge governments to report on the SDG indicator (5.3.2) related to FGM/C.

FGM/C has several immediate and long term health complications on women including infections, painful menstruation, urinary and vaginal problems, complications during childbirth and even death. "It is also important to frame FGM/C as a bodily rights and bodily integrity issue," added Ms Thanethiran.

Often, proponents of FGM/C justify the practice on the basis of religion, or some unproven health benefit or claim that it doesn't harm women and girls. But religious scholars from different countries are divided on this, and some Muslim countries have banned FGM/C through fatwas and the law.

Support for the initial stage of development of the Asia Network to End FGM/C is being provided by Wallace Global Fund.

"No region of the world is immune from female genital mutilation/cutting, and advocates are increasingly speaking out against the practice throughout Asia," said Susan Gibbs, Program Director for Women's Rights and Empowerment at the Wallace Global Fund. "The practice remains poorly understood and largely hidden in the shadows. Wallace Global is convinced that the new Asia Network will play a powerful role in drawing attention to the issue and helping galvanize a regional response."

Activists, researchers and organisations interested in being involved in shaping the network can contact online@arrow.org.my or ebony@orchidproject.org.

More women killed in gender violence than armed conflicts in parts of Asia – expert

In India over 8,000 women are killed every year over dowry disputes.

By Ben Lih Yi

Thomas Reuters Foundation (13.10.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2hOJjq7> - Gender-based violence is emerging as one of the deadliest forms of violence in Asia and it has killed more women than armed conflicts in some parts of the region, an expert on conflict said on Friday, calling for more attention to the issue.

Researcher Patrick Barron of the U.S.-based non-profit The Asia Foundation said a two-year study on conflicts and violence revealed violence against women in Asia has greater - and more deadly - impacts than previously thought.

In India for example, the study showed over 8,000 women were killed every year over dowry disputes - a figure far higher than the 278 who died in a Maoist rebellion in eastern India last year.

"The evidence is not absolute but it certainly suggested that gender-based violence is one of the largest killers in Asia - if not the largest," Barron told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Washington.

"We see a rise in violence as women assert their rights," the group's conflict and development regional director added.

He said the trend was also seen in Nepal, where gender-based violence has become the deadliest form of violence this year.

"Honour" killings, dowry-related deaths and the lynching of women branded as witches have persisted in some parts of South Asia, including India and Pakistan, despite years of campaign to halt these practices.

An archaic practice of banishing menstruating girls and women to sheds during their period also persists in remote parts of Nepal, resulting in some dying from attacks by wild animals or from snake bites.

Barron said the study released on Thursday also showed gender-based violence is becoming the deadliest threat to women in Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia and East Timor but a lack of data hampers a definitive conclusion.

"The problem is a lot of gender-based violence happens within households and because of cultural norms against reporting it, a lot of it goes unreported," he said.

Barron said he hoped the findings will spur lawmakers into action to tackle the problem.

Dowries - often in the form of jewellery, cars or money - are given by the bride's family to the groom and his parents, traditionally to ensure the bride will be looked after in her new home.

The custom has been outlawed in India but still widely practised. Disputes erupt when the groom's family demanding more money after marriage, often driving the woman to suicide and in the worst cases, she is murdered by her husband and family.
