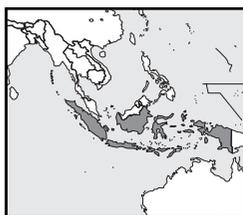


## In the midst of an unresolved crisis

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Indonesia's economic growth rate dropped to an all time low of -13% in 1998 after the Asian economic crisis in 1997. The exchange value of the rupiah fell by more than 25%, and the number of people living below the poverty line tripled, reaching 40% in 1999. Matters grew even worse with the political crisis that marked the fall of the New Order leadership and the beginning of the reform era.

The New Order regime under Soeharto was in power for nearly 32 years, and its fall was followed by revolts, riots, and prolonged religious and ethnic conflicts in some regions, among others in Aceh, Papua, the Moluccas, Central Sulawesi, West Kalimantan and South Kalimantan. Hundreds of people lost their lives and their homes. With the risk of national disintegration, it will be difficult for Indonesia to rise from the poor socio-economic conditions caused by the crisis.

In a social system with strong patriarchal values, women bear the heaviest burden under existing conditions. Women face poverty, violence and injustice in their daily lives. This inequity is ignored in public discourse, because decision-makers consider the problem to be exclusively female and outside the context of political development. Women are not considered as political and economic agents in the Indonesian system. As a result, improvement of women's living conditions is relatively slow compared with that of the other groups.

### Struggle for basic needs

Women are less educated than men. Data from 1998 show that the higher the educational level required by a given activity or position, the lower the level of women's participation. Institutions of higher learning are generally more distant from home, so parents do not allow daughters to continue their education for safety reasons. Furthermore, education is expensive, and poorer families with limited resources put the education of female children in second place. This practice is supported by the norm that requires female children to help out in the household.

In 1994, the government established a program of nine-year compulsory education and a program to fight illiteracy, but the level of illiterate women aged 10-44 is still relatively high, namely 5.3% compared with 2.7% for men (1999 data). Illiteracy limits women's access to information and thus their opportunities for development.

Although the maternal mortality rate is dropping, it is still the worst in the Southeast Asia region, namely 334 per 100,000. In general, the cause of death is related to pregnancy (bleeding, pregnancy poisoning and infection). Poverty prevents pregnant women from accessing health services and sufficient nutritious food. The infant mortality rate is also high, namely 46 per 1,000 births.

### Critical roles, but marginalised

Open unemployment is increasing from year to year, more so since the crisis. Unemployment, which stood at 3.0% of the EAP in 1990, was 6% in 1999, with a higher rate for women of 6.9%. Although women slightly outnumber men in the population, women's participation in the work force is much lower (45% than men's (73.5%).

More women than men are unpaid workers: 34.9% of women worked with no wages in 1999, compared with 9.4% of men. Women tend to work in the informal sector, because this kind of work allows them to also perform their roles in the household. In the formal sector, women workers generally hold lower positions because of their limited formal education and skills. Men still earn more than women. The 1999 data show that women were paid 70.3% of what men received for the same or comparable work.

There has been an increase in the number of women heads-of-household, as widows, divorcees and single women aged 45-59 years. The data of 1999 show that women head 13.2% of households. The relatively high level of divorcees (12%) is one reason for this situation. Women-headed households are generally poorer compared with those headed by men. Besides, acknowledgement that women heads-of-household have the same rights as men in that position still constitutes a process of long struggle. This is particularly so in villages where authority in families headed by women tends to be delegated to sons or other close male relatives.

Given the degree of poverty and limited employment opportunities, especially in villages, many people work abroad as a survival strategy. The main countries of destination are Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Korea and Hong Kong. The 1999 data show that more women work abroad than men, namely 242.6 women for every 100 male workers. Women who enter the informal sector as household servants abroad are susceptible to exploitation and violent actions such as rape, mistreatment, and even murder. Protection for these women is almost non-existent, by the receiving country as well as by the Indonesian government. Cases against women migrant workers are registered every year.

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### Excluded from the decision-making process

Women were the majority (57%) of voters in the 1999 general elections. Nevertheless, they hold only 8.8% of seats in the Legislative Assembly. In the matter of leadership, women are still left far behind. At the lowest level of government in the villages, women hold only 2.3% of leadership positions. Leadership by women is still a controversial issue for the majority of Indonesians as their role in the domestic sector is seen as limiting their movements in the public sector. Consequently, the voices and interests of women are not adequately represented in decision-making processes.

### Way out?

Various efforts have been made by the government and NGOs to improve socio-economic conditions. Several emergency and regular programs have been undertaken to overcome poverty. Examples are a program for fighting illiteracy, making nine years of education compulsory, and provision of educational funds

for children of poor families. Health examinations for pregnant women, free provision of contraceptives, and provision of health cards are part of a health program for the poor community. There are also programs for income generation, micro credit services, and employment creation. Political education is being undertaken by activist groups and women's NGOs in an effort to increase the number of women in decision-making positions.

Nevertheless, considering the great number of Indonesian people living below the poverty line, their spread and isolated geographic condition, and unresolved economic, social and political problems, the various efforts that have been implemented have made little difference. Indonesia's dependence on foreign loans to finance development is creating new problems for the people in the present and for the future. ■

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