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If I were an ASEAN woman...

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Let me begin with what I grasp to be the predominant force that is pushing the drive for greater ASEAN integration – globalisation. I shall not attempt to define this phenomenon for lack of time. Suffice it to say that I am speaking of that economic paradigm that is the target of the anti/alter globalisation movement and which, despite its seemingly economic face, carries with it social, cultural and political elements as well.

Globalisation has indeed changed our world in such a way that has made this panel’s premise possible or perhaps necessary. Resistances to globalisation have contributed to critical theories that

problematise the formation of identities around certain axes such as citizenship and national sovereignty.

We have seen the sovereignty of developing nations undermined by the regime of neo-liberalism. We have also seen the redrawing of the geo-political map (for example the European Union, Mercosur, and Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) as nations cope with the changing global economic order. The arguments cut one way or the other – regionalise so that we can push competitive advantages together against other regions. Regionalise so we can exploit our competitive advantages over others in the same region instead of

letting others in other regions do so. As you can see one argument makes a regional identity seem sensible (ASEAN vs. others) while the other is a potential deal breaker for any genuine regional cooperation (the more developed economies in the ASEAN already exploit their competitive advantages over the less developed ones).

Similarly, the migration of labor to serve increasingly flexible and transnational

as givens. It also means that we need to understand that power struggles need to be redrawn because we are seeing foci of power outside the economic processes of production or the political power of the state that are nevertheless necessary to the preservation of neo-liberal hegemony.

So then, let me pose this in a manner that is intelligible to the real people who do not inhabit the particular halls in academia where activist nerds congregate. If identity – both regional and national – can be constructed by our political power, what kind of identity would we want?

My first identity proposition would be that I would want to be a citizen of a sovereign country (in my case, the Philippines). Classic liberalism casts citizens as those who possess certain rights that are guaranteed to them by a sovereign state. Many of the ASEAN nation states have been born from anti-colonial struggles that attempted to attain civil and political rights for the colonised population. Feminists, indigenous peoples, sexual minorities, people with disabilities, etc., have then had to insist that they be constituted as citizens by demanding that they enjoy the same rights as their liberated able-bodied, heterosexual and ethnically mainstream brothers. Whereas before the 20th century these rights were confined to the civil and political sphere, social movements have demanded and often achieved guarantees for a broader set of rights in the social and cultural spheres as well as the recognition of new categories such as sexual and reproductive rights.

I am afraid that across the ASEAN few populations have hurdled the rite of passage to citizenship via the full

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processes of wealth and commodity production has made national boundaries porous. The advances in communications and travel that has made this flexibility of production and the mobility of the labor force possible has also caused cultural maps to be redrawn markedly. We no longer assume that cultural communities can be defined by geographic boundaries and the decades-long time frames that we once believed nurtured our rootedness. Here again, we are confronted with the duplicity of our conceptions. Is there really a basis for an ASEAN culture that would allow the Singaporean employer to call her Filipina maid her sister? Does my California-based understanding of Buddhism have anything in common with the Buddhism of my Cambodian brothers and sisters?

What all this has meant is that we now have to create theories of resistance and power that do not take what were once stable things like identity and citizenship

enjoyment of human rights. The totalitarian regime in Burma, the recent military coup in Thailand, the unabated political killings in the Philippines are but a few glaring examples. Across the region we continue to see massive violations of women's rights and especially sexual and reproductive rights.

Anyway, back to my proposed ASEAN identity. On the basis of the assurance of human rights within my nation, I would then be willing to have an identity of being an ASEAN citizen. This would mean that should I travel or work in any country in the ASEAN, all my rights would be equally guaranteed. In my conception of a regional citizenship, I would be quite willing to surrender national sovereignty to a regional regime of common human rights standards that are at par with international standards. Such a ceding of sovereignty would allow exceptions to the principle of non-interference so that violations of human rights such as that which occurred in Aceh or East Timor can be subject to regional mechanisms of mediation, and yes, sanction. In this regard, the banning of many activists from the ASEAN, especially Filipinos, from participating in the World Bank processes in Singapore last month makes it clear that an integrated ASEAN citizenship is not in the immediate horizon.

I am aware that I might be charged with being quite Western by some, seeing as how I have now confessed to being a feminist and a believer in the universality of human rights. I might state that my desire for civil and political rights is quite homegrown, having developed a taste for it when I began work as a young doctor treating the victims of torture under the Marcos

regime. I know that the torture techniques that were carried out in the Marcos jails were surprisingly similar to those carried out by the US military during the war of pacification of the Philippines. I am also aware that the aversion to torture as well as other forms of violation of civil and political rights was an intrinsically ASEAN value during the time of Japanese occupation in World War II, the struggle for national liberation of Vietnam, the struggle against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, and so on. Speaking also of other identities in the ASEAN, I do not think my invocation of human rights protection for the victims in the prisons of Abu Ghraib serves US imperial interests.

As for my feminism, I will also state that Filipina women used the term "feminista" a hundred years ago when they founded the *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* in 1905 after having come through the revolution against Spanish colonialism and the Filipino-American war. These women also founded the *Gota de Leche*, which was concerned with a core reproductive health issue, maternal mortality. The sisters of that great exemplar of Malay genius, Dr. Jose Rizal, were also involved in the forming of these feminist associations. Trinidad Rizal, also helped form the first Masonic lodge for women in the Philippines, a revolt against the colonial Catholic Church and its theocratic excesses. There is also evidence that Trinidad sought information from her brother on birth control. My point? The interest of Filipina women on reproductive health and rights as well as their revolt against fundamentalist religious precepts and their adherence to a non-secular state is also at least a hundred years old and is tied to anti-colonial struggles.

In truth, as someone who helped in the formation of the now-defunct East and Southeast Asian Women and Health Network, I have traveled to most of the ASEAN countries and discovered there women and their organisations who are passionately fighting for their rights.

Thus, whatever else may be the historic and cultural basis for these advocacies, I will argue that the basis for the full respect of human rights including women's rights is a point that the social movements must insist upon if we are to form an ASEAN to our liking.

My argument about citizenship and rights as well as cultural identity is two-fold. I have made the first argument: that there is both a history and a culture for citizenship based on the enjoyment of human rights in ASEAN countries. These democratic aspirations are tied to the colonial struggles that gave birth to most of the nations of the ASEAN, save perhaps for Thailand.

But I shall make a second argument. It is one that is based on yet another definition of citizenship.

Rian Voet (1998) argues that what she calls "an active and sex-equal citizenship" is achievable only if women exercise the

rights they have fought so hard to gain on paper. She argues that women have to actively exercise those rights especially in the political sphere if they are truly to enjoy citizenship.

Mary Dietz (1987) also advocates a citizenship which is participatory and democratic. She believes that the conception that a citizen is merely a bearer of rights is "politically barren." Her indicator of true citizenship is active political participation.

For the purposes of our conference and this panel, I will argue that citizenship means the active participation of citizens in shaping and molding culture and traditions including religious traditions. Too often restrictions on human rights, especially women's rights, in the ASEAN have been justified on the basis of religious edict or cultural traditions. Such justifications treat religion and culture as static and ahistorical and give too much power to the state and other institutions of ideological hegemony in determining just exactly how these customs and traditions are to be interpreted and implemented. This kind of cultural homogenisation is essentially undemocratic and tends to reinforce male power over women and majority power over minorities (whether sexual, religious or tribal) in families, communities, and nations. The power of these cultural hegemonies can very often be tied up to fascist states in obvious forms such as when we see the establishment of theocratic rule, or in less overt fashion as when the state cites some myth of Asian culture to justify the sacrifice of human rights.

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and religion say about what women can and cannot do. Whatever else that custom and tradition is, my right as a citizen allows me to participate in it and change it. This generation of ASEANS, if you will allow me that tentative term, through democratic processes, must shape and pass on to the future a culture that will help the next generations adapt, survive, and flourish. That culture of survival certainly cannot be one that has been

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fashioned on conditions that prevailed centuries or millenia ago.

When I say that even culture must be subject to democracy, I allude to the fact that the member nations of ASEAN are indeed culturally diverse both across nations and within nations. Mutual respect and free interaction must be the rule that guides relationships between member states and relationships between citizens within member states. This principle ties up with the human rights standards such as those of freedom of religious belief and conscience.

There is however one way where I think we can speak of a more ASEAN mode of citizenship and rights. The classic liberalism of the west is indeed beset by the cancer of rabid individualism. This

individualism is the premise upon which is built the ecologically dangerous lifestyles of runaway consumerism of the elites and the myth of economic rationalism that underlies neoliberal economics. It is also why human rights discourse in the past century has over-emphasised individual civil and political rights over the more collective social and economic rights.

Indeed women's unrecognised, undervalued and often unpaid participation in both production and reproduction has been conveniently overlooked by the purveyors of neo-liberal economics. Such severe denial of this reality is understandable since accepting the reality of women's "irrational" sacrifices would threaten neo-liberalism's neurotic belief in *homo economicus*. Here again, the ability to shatter the myth of rational individualism that is the legacy of western liberalism may very well serve an ASEAN seeking more communal, democratic and people-centered models of economic development.

Such individualism is also based on a binary conceptual thinking that tends to make the individual separate from the collective and from nature. Such binary conceptualism is rejected by many eastern philosophies notably, for example, the philosophy that underlies Buddhism.

Women have long proven that they are not economically rational in that they very often sacrifice personal and economic gain for their children, friends, and lovers. This nurturing capacity of women often places them in a double bind. Their more compassionate and communal virtues are held in high regard when autocrats bar them from enjoying

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the more individualistic benefits that come from the full enjoyment of their civil and political rights, saying that this is not in the nature of women. Yet how quickly this valuation of women's virtues is forgotten when heartless neoliberal economic policies are forced down their throats!

Similarly some states and religious authorities argue that granting women sovereignty over their bodies would somehow be an abrogation of national sovereignty or cultural/religious integrity. Yet women's bodies are indeed markers for cultural and national sovereignty when invading armies rape or kill women. This has now become a common technique of genocide and ethnic cleansing that has happened in ASEAN countries as well, most recently in Aceh.

It is obvious from these examples that women are treated as collective identities only when it is to our detriment.

Yet, the rejection of individualism in eastern philosophy is coupled with the valuation of interconnectedness of life. It thus rejects the false binary between the individual and the collective – something that I have yet to see in the interpretation and implementation of economic policy and human rights. To be clear, I believe that an ASEAN rejection of western individuality should result in the full enjoyment of both individual political and civil rights as well as the more collective social, cultural, and economic rights. It would also mean the recognition of women's agency and sovereignty as a necessary condition of national sovereignty.

Indeed, Anne Phillips (1993), cautions against an uncritical reading of women's political involvement as citizenship which defines the political in narrow terms and ignores the barriers to women's political participation that arise from their roles as nurturers. To avoid this the political sphere must be defined to include the areas of reproduction, nurturing, and family relations where women's agency as a political actor must also be recognised.

So, is there such a thing as an ASEAN identity? Is it possible? In my travels in the region, I gained an understanding of the difficulties in forming a regional identity for Southeast Asia. Unlike other regions we are far too diverse culturally. We have no common religion, no common language, not even a single land mass. Yet these obstacles are becoming less daunting because of the changes brought about by an increasingly globalised world. As I have pointed out, we in civil society have the practice, the theory, the philosophical traditions and

therefore, the capacity to influence the formation of a regional identity. That identity will ensure equal enjoyment of individual and collective rights. That identity will be based on the recognition of individual sovereignty as the bedrock of national sovereignty. It is an identity that can ensure social justice and people-centered economic development for all citizens of ASEAN. ■

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