

## **SOUTHEAST ASIA STRATEGIC FORUM 2016:**

### **“WOMEN, BUSINESS, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA”**

*University of Oxford, 14-16 April 2016*

*in conjunction with the Southeast Asian Studies Symposium 2016*

#### **Deadline for Responses: 4 September 2015**

“No nation can achieve the kind of growth that we all want and need if half the population never gets to compete. And we cannot afford any longer to exclude the energy and talent that women add to our economies.”

- Hillary Clinton, 17 November 2012, at Singapore Management University

The barriers towards full female participation in Southeast Asia’s economic growth are manifold and complex. Gender equality is one of the most important issues facing Southeast Asia today, and impacts every single other major issue facing Southeast Asia. In recognition of this, Project Southeast Asia is addressing the issue in its inaugural Southeast Asia Strategic Forum (SSF). The SSF aims to bring together political, business, academia, and civil society leaders for dialogue and collaboration, with the aim of producing a concrete roadmap that can form the basis for action towards positive outcomes.

We invite participation from scholars from all disciplinary backgrounds that would illuminate the historical and contemporary dynamics that impacting female economic participation in Southeast Asia. This may include expertise in areas relating to the intersection of gender with business, entrepreneurship, education, law, culture, or any other related area. Themes to be addressed include:

1. Legal parity, culture, and access to education: eg the historical context and progress made; the gap between the legal theory and practice; the rights of women – property, education, opening a bank account, gaining credit, inheritance including protection against domestic violence and exploitative pay; gender segregation.
2. Women in leadership positions: eg the ability of women to access institutions - women on corporate boards, women in parliament, women in local governments; Improving equality in representation and policy outcomes; how to allocate talent more effectively; female leadership and traditional commercial culture; changing gender based attitudes and social bias.
3. Building the unicorns and shaping the future: eg connectivity across Southeast Asia and with international trade, access to finance, skills, mentorship, and networking; fostering equal access to public sector procurement; single market access and international access.

4. Moving from micro-enterprise to SME status: eg using property and chattels as collateral, building credit history, place in the global supply chain, accessing finance, skills development, technical assistance, childcare support.
5. Transforming female exploitative economies to female empowerment: eg feminised migrant labour economies, eradicating human trafficking, going to court, addressing issues, the role of the law.

The SSF is envisioned not a singular event but a collaborative process which aims to understand an issue, set goals, create a workable roadmap, and build towards further research and development, with the ultimate goal of delivering concrete results. Participants are asked to participate from September 2015 onwards, subject to their own availability, in shaping the SSF agenda. Following the SSF in April 2016, participants will be expected to collaborate on the production of the roadmap, which is expected to lead to funded international collaborative research projects. Travel to and accommodation at the SSF will be funded for all participants, who must commit to attending the entirety of the SSF (around two days), and participating in the production of the SSF outputs.

For more information, including an expected timeline of the process, please visit the website, [asean.ac/women](http://asean.ac/women). Please email expressions of interest, including a brief summary of your expertise, to Jaime Gong <[yuzhe.gong@jesus.ox.ac.uk](mailto:yuzhe.gong@jesus.ox.ac.uk)>, by 4 September 2015.

## **PROJECTED TIMELINE**

August 2015 – Call for Participation (deadline for expressions of interest: 4 September 2015)

October 2015 to January 2016 – Circulation of more detailed information to interested parties; Discussion regarding establishment of SSF agenda.

April 2016 – Southeast Asia Strategic Forum

May to July 2016 – Further consultation, production of roadmap and finalising research proposal, with aim of establishment of international collaborative research project.

August 2016 – Submission of research proposal to funders

## **WOMEN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Southeast Asia is extremely diverse. The eleven Southeast Asian countries differ widely in economic, political, and cultural development. Nonetheless, broad patterns are evident. Women in pre-modern Southeast Asia enjoyed a relatively favourable position in comparison with neighbouring regions in Asia. Over time, the rise of centralized states; the spread of imported religions and philosophies increasingly privileged males and stressed female

subordination. Colonialism reinforced this, recruiting women for cheap wage labour, “reforming” customary laws that had given women considerable autonomy, and instituting structures which formalised male authority. Women played active roles in independence movements, and all post-colonial regimes except Laos and Vietnam have signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and have made advances promoting gender equality, but this has not translated into reality. Women remain marginalised politically. Entrenched attitudes perpetuate gender stereotypes that see women’s roles as that of wife and mother. Some religious teachings continue to emphasise female subordination.

Nevertheless, the continuing acceptance of the idea that a woman can generate and control her own income is still generally evident, although women receive less pay than men for the same work and the options for unskilled workers are limited. In poorer countries and impoverished regions this is apparent in the prevalence of prostitution and the disturbing trafficking of women. From the mid 1960s, as Southeast Asian countries gradually shifted to export-oriented economies, lower-paid women have become essential to factory work. In consequence, women have been more active in labour movements. As overseas domestic workers, they have also been increasingly important to national economies, remitting large amounts of money to their families. Educational opportunities are rising. This has contributed to the blossoming of female-oriented Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) since the 1980s. Several Southeast Asian countries have had female leaders, although all were the daughter or wife of a famous man.

With the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community, an opportunity lies in front of Southeast Asia. The SSF aims to ask, “What is the state of female participation in Southeast Asian economies today?”, “What are our goals for female economic empowerment?”, and “How do we reach those goals from where we are today?”

## **THE SOUTHEAST ASIA STRATEGIC FORUM**

The Southeast Asia Strategic Forum (SSF) is a two day multi-sectoral forum, convened in conjunction with the Southeast Asian Studies Symposium, which seeks to bring together leaders from different sectors (business, politics, academia, and civil society) into a constructive discussion. Project Southeast Asia aims to contribute solutions to our most pressing issues. Over the course of two days, SSF discussions aim to understand the issue; agree upon a common set of goals; and formulate a concrete roadmap for achieving the solutions. The fundamental premise of the SSF is that multisectoral dialogue and collaboration can lead to concrete results.

Participants are requested to commit themselves for the conference as a whole, since the aim is an interactive debate that runs from the opening to the closing session. The programme creates time for discussion in smaller groups, as well as participation in the Southeast Asian Studies Symposium. All those invited are guests of Project Southeast Asia during their stay: accommodation will be provided at Somerville College (one of the first women’s colleges in Oxford) for duration of the SSF.

## **PROJECT SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Project Southeast Asia is an initiative by scholars of Southeast Asia at the University of Oxford. It seeks to promote transnational and interdisciplinary solutions to Southeast Asian issues; to build networks and collaborations between Europe and Southeast Asia, and among political, business, academic, and civil society leaders; and ensure that all Southeast Asians, regardless of background, have the opportunity to study at Oxford. This builds on Oxford's already numerous contributions to Southeast Asia and its unsurpassed track record of excellence in the region, particularly in the field of medicine, where it conducts pioneering research in nearly every Southeast Asian country.

More information is available at [www.projectsoutheastasia.com](http://www.projectsoutheastasia.com).

## **SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SYMPOSIUM**

The Southeast Asian Studies Symposium, organised by Project Southeast Asia and held annually, is the world's largest Southeast Asian Studies conference. Its core aim is to address important Southeast Asian issues relevant to ordinary Southeast Asians, such as sustainable development, environmental change, and infectious diseases, and propose and develop solutions which are sustainable, effective, viable, and culturally appropriate.

In 2015, the 4th Southeast Asian Studies Symposium was held at Sunway University in Malaysia. It had 864 participants from 24 countries, was opened by DYMM Sultan Nazrin Shah of Perak, and closed with a lecture by Prof Jeffrey Sachs (Columbia). The 2016 Southeast Asian Studies Symposium will return to Oxford and be held at Oxford's Mathematical Institute from 13-16 April 2016.

More information is available at [asean.ac/2016](http://asean.ac/2016).