

Women, Tourism and the War on Poverty

WOMEN ARE potentially the most important contributors to the regional battle against poverty. A major report issued by the United Nations' Asia Pacific office indicates that women play a critical role in achieving at least six of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identified by world leaders at a United Nations (UN) summit in September 2000. The UN identified 2015 as the target date for these goals.

Arguably one of the region's most important employers of women, the travel and tourism community has much to gain from a June 4, 2003 report entitled *Promoting the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty Reduction*. A joint undertaking by UNESCAP and UNDP to track the progress countries have made in achieving the MDGs, the report states:

"Educated women have a powerful positive influence, not just on the lives of their own families but on the country as a whole, improving productivity in all sectors of the economy and helping to improve child health and nutrition, reduce child mortality and slow population growth rates." The report adds: "Financing the education of girls is one of the best investments a country can make for both economic and social development."

The eight MDGs are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

Individually and collectively, these inter-linked goals serve to boost the socio-economic stability of societies and lay the foundation for balanced and sustainable growth. By helping to achieve these MDGs, the travel and tourism community is effectively investing in its own future. Travel and tourism can both contribute to and benefit from their actualisation.

Certainly, PATA is playing its role. The historic inauguration of PATA Travel Mart 2003 by Timor-Leste President, HE Xanana Gusmao, will go a long way towards opening up the world's youngest country to tourism. The President appealed to Mart delegates to help his people develop the economy and find jobs.

According to the UN report, Timor-Leste has an appallingly high poverty rate of 37 percent and the region's highest maternal mortality rate of 850 deaths per 100,000 live births. Yet Timor-Leste is only one of the 13 least developed countries (LDCs), 12 landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and 17 small island developing states (SIDS) in the Asia Pacific region that are facing similar problems. The report estimates that at the end of the 1990s, despite the remarkable economic progress made before the 1997 economic crisis, 768 million people in the region were still living on less than US\$1 a day.

The report is unique in that it is predominantly an Asia Pacific effort, compiled and written by a team under UNESCAP Secretary General, Mr. Kim Hak-Su and Assistant Secretary General, Mr. Hafiz Pasha, who is also the Regional Director of the UN Development Programme. Based on contributions from throughout the region and a series of expert meetings, the report is free of the canned policy suggestions that tend to emanate from stakeholders with private agendas.

Mr. Hak-Su says that the ambitious MDGs represent clear

and direct challenges both to individual countries and to the global community, including travel and tourism. "Achieving them would bring enormous benefits to Asia and the Pacific," he said. "Millions more people in the region would be free of poverty and deprivation and be able to lead lives of dignity and choice."

"Fewer children would be stunted by hunger and lack of schooling. Many more women would participate and help to lead development activities at every level. There would be greater protection from preventable diseases and many more people would receive adequate care. And across the region, all sections of society – government, the private sector and civil society – would be working to protect and sustain the natural environment."

Indeed, the report says that achieving basic rights for women is an essential MDG as it is critical to fully achieving all the other MDGs. In Asia and the Pacific, the situation of women has been improving and, in some countries, women have the same opportunities as men. Yet, as the report points out, a lot needs to be done: "The majority of countries still show various kinds of gender discrimination that prevent women from achieving their basic rights."

Here is a brief summary of the report's findings:

GOAL 1: ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER

Poverty is declining. It could drop to around 10 percent by 2015. The rate of poverty decline may slow down as the region begins to encounter its hard-core poor. 'Hard-core poor' refers to the extremely poor, who take a disproportionately longer time to pull out of poverty than the less poor. Hence, anti-poverty efforts may take longer to bear fruit than anticipated.

The report concludes that the target of 2015 is within range of Asia Pacific as a whole. However, it notes that countries such as China (PRC), Indonesia, India and Vietnam are making faster progress than others. Inequality is also felt within the countries themselves as the benefits of economic growth are being less evenly distributed.

GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

A healthy and educated workforce guarantees future sources of adaptable human resources. To achieve this, the most basic requirement is to have all children enrolled in primary

school. Net primary enrolment for the region as a whole has remained static at around 93 percent. Reduced rates of enrolment in some countries, has been offset by significant increases in others. Primary school enrolment in Bangladesh, for example, has increased from 64 percent to almost 100.

Just as important as enrolling children in school is ensuring that they stay there. Completion rates are rising in several countries, notably China (PRC), where it has increased from 88 percent to 94. In many countries, the main issue is the poverty of parents. Although schooling might be free, there are inevitably expenses for equipment, clothing and other items. A further constraint is that parents are unlikely to send children to school if they feel that education is not useful in the short term.

GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

The MDGs place great importance on achieving equality in educational enrolment. In terms of primary education, there have been continued improvements in China (PRC). In the late 1990s there was a moderate disparity, where 92 girls were enrolled for every 100 boys. By 2000 the pattern was reversed so that there were more girls enrolled than boys. One of the most striking cases is Mongolia, where there are far more girls than boys enrolled in secondary education – 111 girls for every 100 boys.

The ratio of female to male literacy is now quite high in most countries in the region, though noticeably lower in South Asia. However, the situation is likely to improve. In Bangladesh, for example, the gender gap in primary education has been closing rapidly.

GOAL 4: REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY

Millions of children in the region die before their fifth birthday. The majority of these children die from a combination of malnutrition and preventable diseases, such as acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, measles and malaria.

There are some striking success stories. Bangladesh, Indonesia and Nepal managed to halve their rates of child mortality during the 1990s. Lao PDR and Bhutan have also seen steep declines. Sri Lanka, despite all odds, has succeeded

in reducing the rate to 19 deaths per 1,000 live births. The most basic strategy is to attack poverty, since the poorest children are at greatest risk.

GOAL 5: IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

Tens of thousands of women in the region die each year during childbirth. In addition, for every woman who dies, many more suffer disabilities that can affect them for the rest of their lives. Almost all of these deaths are avoidable.

The maternal mortality rate in developed countries is relatively minute. The rate in Australia, for example, is only six per 100,000 live births. In many developing countries in the region, the rate is well above 200, with the highest rates of all in Timor-Leste (850), Nepal (830) and Afghanistan (820).

One important step towards reducing maternal mortality is to ensure that women are adequately nourished. Also, better educated women usually have a greater say over pregnancy decisions, are less likely to resort to unsafe abortions and they can acquire more information on the risks of childbirth and what to do should complications arise.

Better educated and more confident women are also more likely to start having children later. This is important because girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die from childbirth as women in their twenties. The countries with the highest rate of maternal mortality are also those with the highest number of teenage pregnancies.

GOAL 6: COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES

By the end of 2001, some seven million people across the region were living with HIV/AIDS, including one million who had become infected in that year alone. In China (PRC), the prevalence among adults may seem low at 0.1 percent but this translates to around 850,000 people and infections are rising rapidly. In India, a prevalence of 0.6 per cent represents some four million people over a broad cross-section of the population.

The highest rates of infection are found among drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men. From these groups it can spread rapidly into the rest of the population. Thailand and Cambodia have high prevalence rates but determined efforts have brought the disease under

greater control. Of the larger countries, only the Philippines seems to have avoided an epidemic.

More than half of the HIV infections in the region have been in people younger than 25. This is partly due to rising levels of substance abuse and patterns of sexual behaviour.

More than 1.8 million children in the region have lost one or more parents to HIV/AIDS. Even before their parents die, medical expenses and the inability to work will have pushed the family further into poverty. If the primary breadwinner dies first, their poverty will deepen. Sometimes one of the older children will become the head of the household and drop out of school to work and care for his or her brothers and sisters. If all the children are young, they may have to rely on members of the extended family, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

GOAL 7: ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Although many poor people suffer from the effects of deforestation and air pollution, probably the more immediate health hazard is from polluted water. The most severe problems are in rural areas, where millions of people rely on water from unprotected natural sources. Some of the worst problems are in the rural areas of Afghanistan, Mongolia, Cambodia and Lao PDR.

There has been some progress. In India, rural coverage – in terms of access to fresh water – increased from 61 percent to 79 between 1990 and 2000. In Nepal, access to fresh water increased to 87 percent from 64 over the same period.

GOAL 8: DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

Asia Pacific societies are changing steadily. Many more people are recognising the importance of promoting the rights of women. And women with education and skills continue to boost the economic prosperity of the more dynamic countries in the region. Many more governments, civil society organisations and NGOs are determined to increase women's opportunities. Travel and tourism can play a role in this cause.

The travel and tourism is a major contributor to poverty alleviation, both directly and indirectly. It is more evenly balanced than other industries, creating jobs in both urban and rural areas. In the Asia Pacific, most of the provincial

jobs created are for women. Low-income earners are primary beneficiaries, be they vendors, souvenir-makers, drivers, housekeepers, farmers, fishermen or any of the dozens of professions that supply goods and services to the travel and tourism industry.

When times are good, the travel and tourism community is generally very conscious of its cultural, social and environmental responsibilities. As the good times return, readers may wish to refer back to this edition of *Issues & Trends* to work out how to contribute to the MDGs.

Here are three suggested courses of action aimed at forging stronger partnerships between women, the tourism industry and the UN's goals:

1) The International Federation of Women's Travel Organizations (IFWTO at www.ifwto.org) is a global network of women in travel. It has a number of clubs around the world. Other independent groups are emerging, such as Women in Tourism based in the Gold Coast, Australia (<http://womenintourism.org/index.htm>).

While these groups are primarily involved in enhancing the professional standards of women in tourism, they are also doing much to combat child-sex tourism and other social ills. An alternative way to reach the same goal is to alleviate the poverty that drives women and children into the supply side of the sex industry. Incorporating MDGs into the agenda of these groups would help put both the travel industry and women on the frontline of a common cause.

2) The travel and tourism industry needs more check-and-balance watchdogs. The UN sees NGOs as being crucial to democratic societies. One such travel-related NGO is Tourism Concern in the UK (<http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/>). Their project to help porters in Nepal offers an example of what kind of action is possible. Travel and tourism academics can help set up such NGOs and work with them to raise a voice against unethical practices, excesses and abuses in the industry.

3) The UN needs to be continually updated on what the travel and tourism industry is doing. This is of critical importance. Presently, the contribution of travel and tourism to the MDGs does not figure on the UN agenda. The MDG

report, for example, ignored the contribution of travel and tourism to the employment of women in the Asia Pacific region. Perhaps it is time for a conference, or a series of seminars, to bring together the UN, civil society and women in travel to forge new partnerships to achieve the MDGs.

CONCLUSION

All of the MDGs are well worth striving for, however, there is one important step the industry can take internally, and that is to ensure proper pricing policies. The cutthroat discounting that regularly affects the industry invariably affects the incomes of the lowest paid workers. These workers are also the first to withstand the worst of industry downturns.

The industry needs to find ways to manage its capacity growth to prevent wild price gyrations and competitive pressures. Travel and tourism in the region has a worldwide reputation for offering inexpensive, discounted products. This reputation does little to help boost the incomes of those supplying goods and services to the industry.

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