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Businesswomen making gains in ASEAN nations

Michael J. Solender, The Business Journals

Success comes with developing political and social attitudes, respect for educational advances and widespread family /entrepreneurial business.



Hotelier Thanpuying Chanut Piyaoui is a shining example of how women can succeed in Asia and is a business “rock-star” in her native Thailand.

Founder and honorary chair of Dusit International, one of Thailand’s most recognized publicly-held companies, Chanut, 93, used her extensive business network, keen eye for hospitality and canny business acumen to build her empire.

Women are gaining ground both in workforce numbers and senior positions held in Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), yet their representation remains low compared to their male counterparts, according to a 2013 study conducted by Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR).

The data showed that women held 32 percent of senior management positions in ASEAN publicly held companies, compares to 24 percent globally. The current ASEAN makeup includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Brunei. These nations represent a population of nearly 600 million people, or almost 9 percent of the world's population. The combined nominal GDP is more than three trillion U.S. dollars, according to a report by EC Europa.

The Philippines topped the IBR list of ASEAN nations with 37 percent women in senior management positions. Thailand was close behind at 36 percent.

Most influential Thai citizen

Six decades ago in 1948, Thanpuying Chanut Piyaoui acquired her first hotel in Bangkok and started what went on to become Dusit International. The luxury collection of more than 35 properties throughout Southeast Asia has become synonymous with the Thai brand of opulent luxury, and is one of the most recognized hospitality brands in the world today.

Chanut was recognized by *The Nation Magazine* as one of Thailand's 35 most influential citizens in the area of economy and business. "Chanut really is a remarkable woman," said George T. Haley, professor of marketing and international business at the University of New Haven and author of *New Asian Emperors: The Business Strategies of the Overseas Chinese*. "She embodies so many of the qualities that make successful leaders, and dispels the notion that women can't achieve the highest levels of success in business in ASEAN nations."

Contrary to stereotype, says Haley, "I have seen more and more women at the very top in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia perhaps has the greatest number of women CEOs, and demonstrates a contemporary Islamic culture and ideas regarding women in business. Relationships and network development remains key to success regardless of gender."

For Westerners, conducting business successfully in Southeast Asia means paying great attention to cultural beliefs, values and practices that may contrast with their own.

"Western women must know a little of the history concerning gender issues in these various countries," said Dr. Karen Walch, consultant and educator at the Thunderbird Global School of Management.

Understand cultural preferences

Walch said the most universal "dos and don'ts" are to understand your own cultural preferences for doing business, and to learn how to switch your style to match the current cultural norms in each country. She said businesswomen can conduct their own cultural assessment and perform due diligence for each country and region. "Western educated women are respected when they are not too aggressive and can demonstrate that they are supported by the men on their team. This confidence is observed and respected by ASEAN male counterparts," she said.



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Walch is quick to point out differences among ASEAN nations' attitudes towards women in the workplace. For instance, she said Vietnam has made considerable progress in reducing gender disparities in the last 20 years. The World Bank now considers Vietnam as one of the more advanced countries with respect to gender equality. In terms of economic participation, there is almost equality between genders.

In the Philippines, women in pre-colonial society enjoyed just as much freedom as the men – they had rights, privileges, owned property and businesses, and held public office. The Filipino egalitarian nature can be seen in the non-gender specific Filipino language. However, after colonialism, more gender-specific roles became the norm. Today, there is still gender role stereotyping, and women are quickly dominating the health and education sectors.

“Today, women entrepreneurs make up a large percentage of small to medium-sized businesses which employ family and community members in their enterprises,” Walch said. “ASEAN women are representative of the World Bank’s studies on micro-loans, which conclude that investments in women who own businesses in the developing world have a significant impact on national economic development.”
