



Gender equality in the Philippines is ranked the best across East Asia according to the Global Gender Gap Index 2017. This reflects Filipino women's comparatively strong results in educational attainment, political empowerment and economic participation and opportunity.

Filipino women are encouraged to excel in school and in the workplace, and it is common for them to run their own enterprises and hold leadership positions in business and politics. However socio-economic inequality within the Philippines mean that almost one quarter of Filipino women live in poverty.

Women in the family

The Filipino state recognises that women have an important role to play in nation-building and the constitution supports women's dual right to be both workers and mothers.

However, in practice, women are the mainstay of family life and widely expected to be the primary carers of children and the aged.

Increasing rates of women's participation in paid employment have not shifted social norms leaving most women with a double burden of responsibility for paid work and unpaid care.

The distribution of unpaid care work

In the absence of public care infrastructure, Filipino households carry a heavy care burden. Care for young children and the elderly remains primarily the responsibility of the family, with the home the location in which most care is provided. In working class households, the care work is typically relegated to older children or members of the extended family who are not in paid work.

Where women are employed in their own small/medium enterprises children often accompany them to the workplace. Middle-class and wealthy women can afford to employ domestic workers or pay for private professional care services to supplement family care, in part relieving women in these households from the double burden.

Balancing work and care

A recent ILO-Gallup poll reported that 88% of Filipinos agree it is acceptable for woman to have a paid job outside the home. This attitude reflects the development of Filipino law which integrates national maternalist norms within the broader agenda for gender equality and economic development. But social attitudes and a generally supportive legal environment have not delivered parity in the

workplace, with women's workforce participation rate lower than men's (48% vs 75%) and women's non-agricultural employment concentrated in services, sales and as clerks. Middle-class women have successfully used education as a means of upward mobility and are more likely than men to work in professional and public sector managerial roles. The 2009 Magna Carta of Women supported anti-discrimination measures in the workplace as well as positive initiatives such as workplace childcare, breastfeeding stations and paid maternity leave. These measures are designed to assist women to manage their work and care responsibilities while contributing to national economic development.

However, problems with enforcement mean that pregnancy, childcare, and family responsibilities continue to be significant barriers to women's career development, and many women remain vulnerable to discrimination, harassment and violence in the workplace.

Socio-economic inequalities deeply shape patterns of work and care in the Philippines. Women in wealthy households employ domestic workers to assist with child care, elder care and regular household duties. More than 2 million Filipino women are employed as domestic workers in the homes of wealthier Filipino households. The employment of domestic workers creates care deficits that, in turn are filled by other, more vulnerable women who have less choices about how to balance their work and care.

The Philippines is also one of the world's top four sending countries of migrant domestic workers, primarily to other south east Asian countries, the middle east and the USA, creating another set of households with heightened care needs.

Policy challenges

The abundance of cheap domestic labour has underwritten gendered social norms that care is a woman's responsibility and something to be managed within the private sphere of the family household, leaving the state and the private sector with little incentive to invest in public care

infrastructure. However, in recent years disquiet about low wages and poor conditions of domestic workers has led to growing recognition that care is a political issue.

The Philippines is the only Asian country to ratify the 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention 189 and in 2012 introduced the Domestic Worker's Act. The Act recognises domestic workers as employees and stipulates payment of a minimum wage and limited social security benefits. While the formalisation of domestic work has been welcomed, the very low wage rates stipulated by the Act could be interpreted to further legitimise cheap domestic labour as the mainstay of the Filipino work/care regime.

Pressure to extend universal early childhood education and care remains limited, with legislation introduced in 2000 laying the beginnings of a national approach to early childhood care and development with a focus only on 3 and 4 year olds. And unlike many other Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines is not experiencing the pressures associated with a rapidly aging population and at this stage families remain responsible for care, as mandated by the Constitution.

Dr Elizabeth Hill is Senior Lecturer in Political Economy. This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Investing in Women Initiative, a program of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Sydney Southeast Asia Centre | Professor Michele Ford
T +61 2 9351 7797 | E michele.ford@sydney.edu.au
W sydney.edu.au/southeast-asia-centre

