

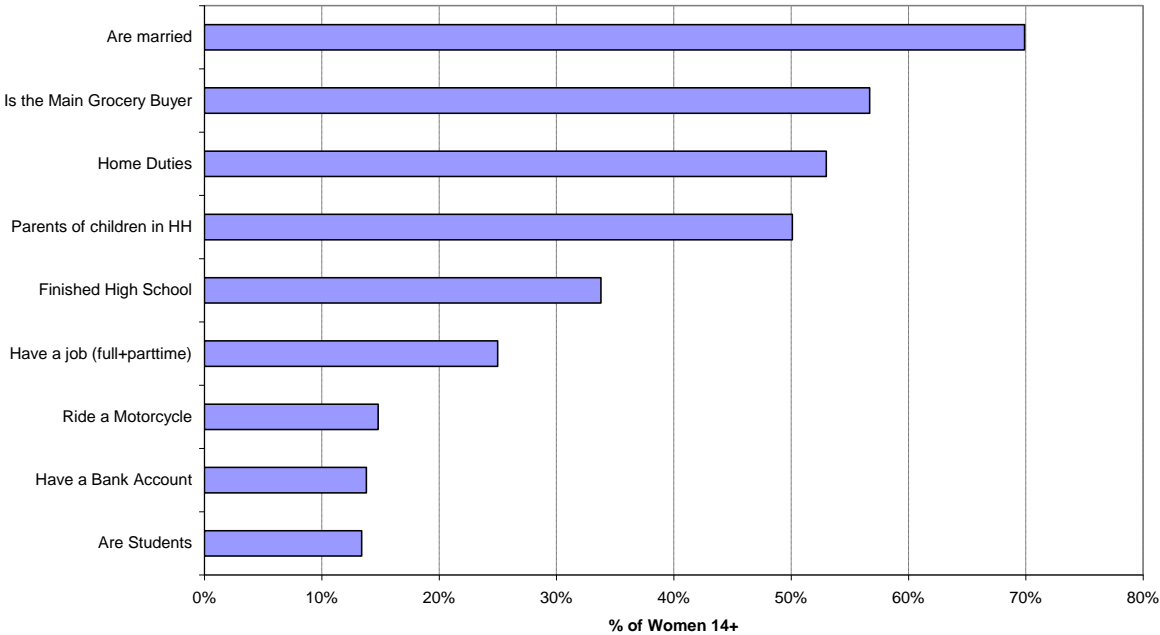
Are women going to be better off in the 2010s than in the 2000s?

Pretty. Tough. Two words pop into my head as I watch a group of ladies enter the GUM, Moscow’s grande olde shopping mall. It is -14 Celsius outside in Red Square, as they shake the snow off their overcoats. I am settling in to write this week’s column over endless cups of coffee in the café of Gastronome No1, once a favourite of politburo members.

My thoughts turn to Indonesia, women in particular. It hasn’t been a good decade for women around the world. While more than half the human race continues to live in some form of poverty, two-thirds of the underprivileged are women. How are Indonesia’s women faring, at the turn of a new decade? Who are they today, how influential are they in the consumer economy? As I look at the chart, it strikes me that marriage as an institution is alive and well. Of all the ladies 14 years and older in age, a robust 70 per cent are married. That percentage is steady, growing in recent years. For a young country, that is a surprisingly high number especially in comparison to Western societies.

In Indonesia, the ladies control the domestic budget. 57 per cent of women are the nation’s main grocery buyers. That makes them the boss in 9 out of 10 households, much higher than in India for instance. This is a seemingly obvious fact that is all too often ignored by too many marketers. From toothpastes to motorcycles, many of them have overwhelming influence on brand-choice. This power can start relatively early in life for a woman who marries young, and can remain till she is the controller of the purse strings in a large extended family. More than two generations live under the roof of most homes, across the country, in the cities, towns and villages. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon is holding a pattern as well with cost of living compelling generations to live together. The nuclear family isn’t anywhere near becoming a major force in Indonesian society anytime soon.

The Women of Indonesia in 2010



Half the fairer sex, 14 years and over are housewives. At 53 per cent today, this number has in fact grown marginally in recent years, a significant comment on where society is heading. In general, women create little pressure on the job market, even while their presence in business and politics becomes increasingly visible. As a unit, the family can only benefit from her presence at home. Exactly half of all women are mothers of children in the household. Again, in comparison to other societies both in the East and the West, this is a very high number and tracking steadily over time.

Perhaps the most significant changes in the life of Indonesia's women is the rapid growth in the numbers who have finished SMA, high school. In just five years, the rate of climb from 21 per cent in 2005 to 34 per cent in 2009, is dramatic indeed. With many choosing to stay home, a better educated mother augurs well for the nation's future. This is a development of wide-ranging impact on society, influencing healthcare to social behaviour, politics to business.

Half the women who are not housewives have a job, full or part-time. That is 25 per cent of all Indonesian women. This number is holding steady, in the face of rapid improvements in the numbers of educated women. More and more of these working women are riding motorcycles today. That number has grown from 11 per cent of all women five years ago to 15 per cent today. And climbing. This phenomenon has taken years for motorcycle manufacturers to first discover and then embrace. It is influencing design and handling, not just colours and names.

But there is one major number measured by Roy Morgan Research that is heading in the wrong direction. The percentage of women with active bank accounts has diminished over the years, from 20 per cent in 2005 to 14 per cent today. This is yet another major sign that Indonesia not only remains a cash marketplace, it is becoming even more so. This is a setback for the country as a whole, with obvious impact on savings as well as asset development. For the overwhelming majority, there is little of either to speak of. Higher banking fees have not helped in developing banking relationships, but it is the everyday squeeze on the shopping budget that is creating tension even as rupiah wages go up. With a growing population of female students at 13 per cent of all women today, many of whom are staying on to finish high school, this negative trend will hopefully be reversed in time.

March 8 is International Women's Day, a holiday in some countries but very popular here in Russia. Taking off from a 1908 rebellion by women workers in America demanding better pay and working conditions, it became a movement in 1910 with the first international conference of women. A day that is perhaps worthy of greater attention than it enjoys in most countries, while the plight of women across the world fails to improve.

These conclusions are based on findings from Roy Morgan Single Source, the country's largest syndicated survey with over 25,000 Indonesian respondents annually, projected to reflect almost 90% of the population over the age of 14. The survey is used by more marketers and advertising agencies than any other survey in the country.

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