

**Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

Committee on Social Development

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Strategies for leaving no one behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**Strategies for advancing women's economic empowerment in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The economic empowerment of women is a critical consideration in the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a key component of target 5.5 of Goal 5, on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and means of implementation 5.a, as well as an important part of Goal 8 on the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. It is also a part of Goal 1, through target 1.4, on ensuring that all men and women have equal rights to economic resources to end poverty in all its forms. Therefore, promoting women's economic empowerment has the potential to advance multiple Goals and support inclusive sustainable development for all.

The present document contains an analysis of the trends and challenges related to women's economic empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as strategy and policy recommendations to address these challenges in order to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Committee on Social Development is invited to review the issues and recommendations contained in the present document and to provide the secretariat with guidance on its future work in the area of social development, particularly with regard to the economic empowerment of women.

* ESCAP/CSD/2018/L.1/Rev.1.

I. Introduction

1. In recognition of the importance of gender equality as a matter of fundamental human rights and as integral to the well-being of societies around the world, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contains Sustainable Development Goal 5 on the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment. In addition, in the 2030 Agenda it is recognized that gender considerations should not be seen in isolation as they are cross-cutting in nature; therefore, gender equality is mainstreamed in the Goals on education, health and poverty, among others. Building on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Goals and targets for gender equality and women's empowerment in the 2030 Agenda provide the international community with additional momentum for renewed action on key issues that are holding girls and women back from attaining their full rights and achieving their highest potential.

2. The economic empowerment of women is a critical consideration in the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a key component of Sustainable Development Goal 5 under targets 5.1, 5.4 and 5.5 and means of implementation 5.a, as well as an important part of Goal 8 on the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. It is also a part of Goal 1 on ensuring that all men and women have equal rights to economic resources to end poverty in all its forms. Gender equality and a country's economic growth are strongly correlated. According to studies by the International Monetary Fund, for example, a 0.1 reduction in gender inequality as measured by the United Nations' gender inequality index is associated with almost 1 percentage point of higher economic growth.¹ Another estimate, from the McKinsey Global Institute, is that advancing women's equality could add \$4.5 trillion to annual gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025 for Asia and the Pacific as a whole.²

3. Promoting women's economic participation requires action in a range of areas, including (a) the revision, adoption and enforcement of legislation that mandates equality of rights and opportunities for women and men; (b) the implementation of measures that encourage balance between working life and family life, for women and men; (c) gender-based budgeting to improve allocation of resources for women's economic empowerment programmes and policies; (d) enhancing women's access to productive assets, including property and financial and digital assets; and (e) tackling discriminatory social norms.

¹ Christian Gonzales and others, "Catalyst for change: empowering women and tackling income inequality", IMF Staff Discussion Note, No. SDN/15/20 (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2015).

² McKinsey Global Institute, *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific* (New York, McKinsey and Company, 2018).

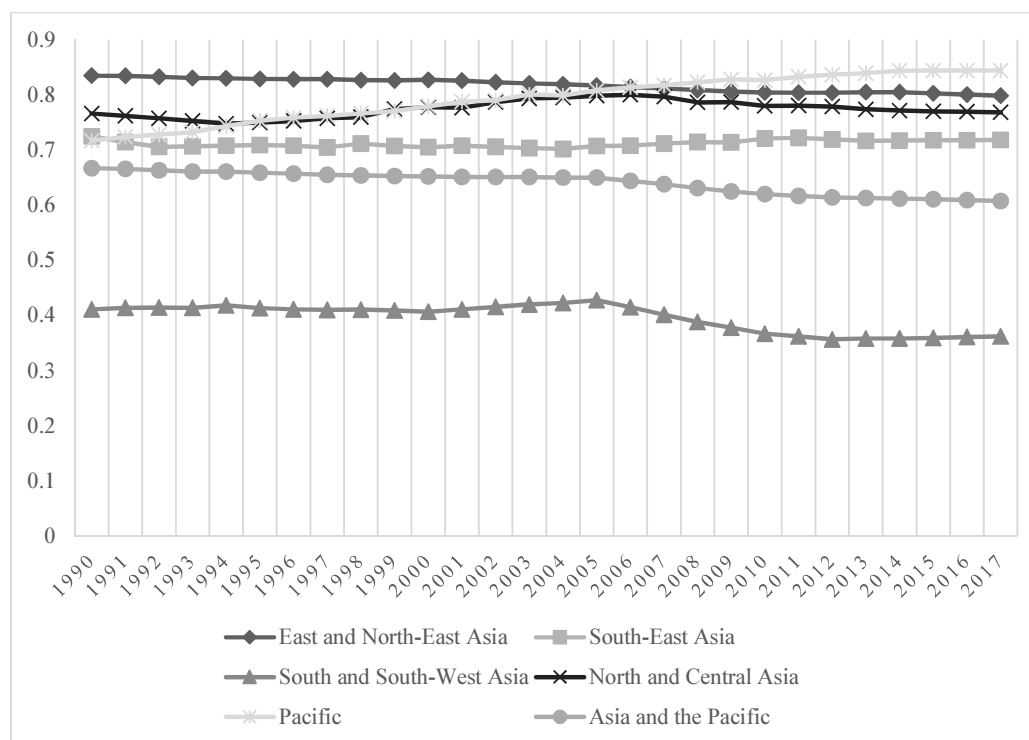
II. Situation analysis

A. Where and how are women working in Asia and the Pacific?

1. Labour force participation of women in Asia and the Pacific has declined and they are more likely to be in vulnerable employment

4. Stemming from structural barriers and historically unequal power relations, women cannot fully exercise their rights to decent work in the region. Female-to-male labour force participation ratios have declined in Asia and the Pacific, from 0.67 in 1990 to 0.61 in 2017, with South and South-West Asia registering the lowest level (figure I)

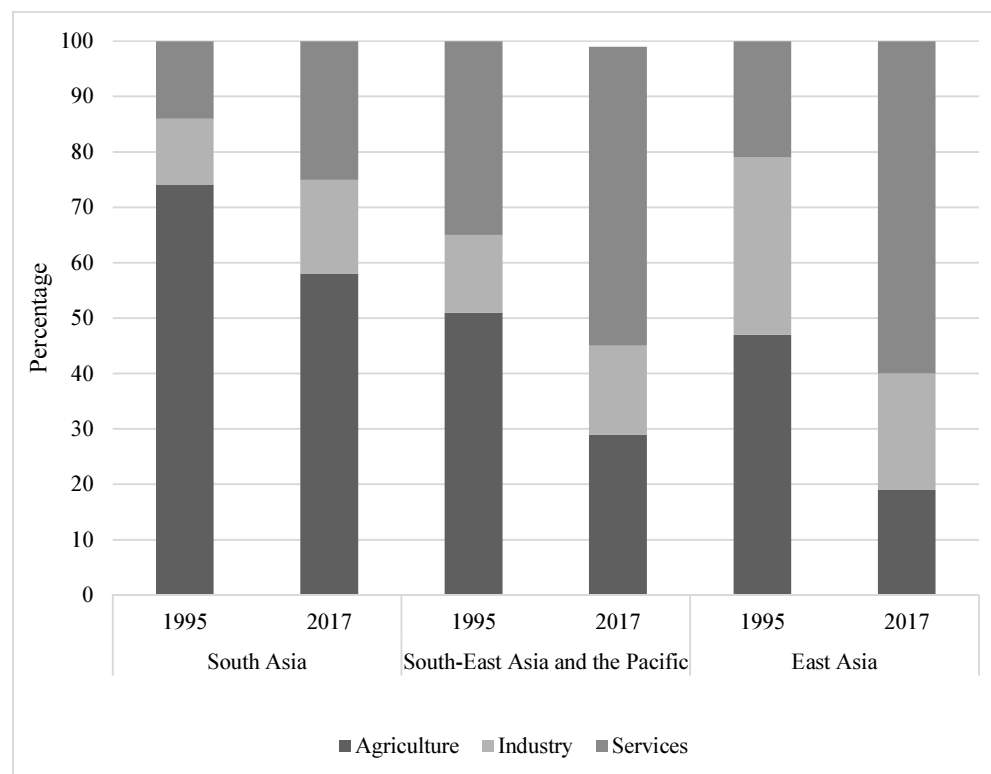
Figure I
Female-to-male labour force participation ratios in Asia and the Pacific, 1990–2017



Source: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) calculations based on International Labour Organization (ILO), ILOSTAT. Available at www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/ilostat-home/home?_adf.ctrl-state=j96oop3di_4&_afLoop=53961131928856 (accessed on 16 October 2018).

5. Beyond labour force participation rates, a key trend in Asia and the Pacific is a changing share of employment by sector. Over the past two decades, particularly in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, agriculture was the primary source of employment for women and men. However, as illustrated in figure II, women are now increasingly employed in the services sector. This shift, however, has been relatively marginal in South Asia where slightly less than two thirds of employed women work in agriculture. Moreover, across the region, women are less likely to work in industry, which often yields higher value-added, higher-paying jobs.

Figure II
Women’s share of employment by sector, 1995 and 2017



Source: ESCAP calculations based on ILO, ILOSTAT (see figure I).

6. Women are more likely to be employed in positions that reflect traditional gender roles – in what have been called the five C jobs: caring, cashiering, cleaning, catering and clerical work.³

7. Women are also more likely than men to be engaged in work that is devoid of social protection, takes place in hazardous environments and involves casual contracts. An estimated 78 per cent of women workers in South and South-West Asia and 60 per cent in South-East Asia continue to be concentrated in vulnerable employment.⁴ Persisting stereotypes, differences in access to education and vocational training, the structure of the labour market, and gender-based discrimination at entry and in work are among the causes for women’s overrepresentation in vulnerable and low-paying employment in the region.

8. The gender wage gap in the region varies greatly within subregions and country-income categories. For instance, in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Nepal, women earn approximately 40 per cent less than men, while in the Philippines and Turkey, the trend is reversed.⁵

³ *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2015: Facts and Trends at the Outset of the 2030 Development Agenda* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.16.II.F.1).

⁴ ESCAP calculations based on ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends 2018*. Available at www.ilo.org/wesodata (accessed on 16 October 2018).

⁵ ESCAP, *Online Statistical database*. Available at http://data.unescap.org/escap_stat (accessed on 16 October 2018).

2. **Formal versus informal: women work predominantly in the informal sector**

9. There are no direct measurements of the informal sector and informal employment in Asia and the Pacific. However, a combination of measurement initiatives in some countries and estimates confirm that the informal economy in Asia is large, multi-segmented and segregated by gender. The informal economy encompasses more than half of non-agricultural employment in most developing regions, with estimates as high as 82 per cent in South Asia and 65 per cent in East and South-East Asia. Estimates for selected individual countries in the region show that informal employment, as a percentage of non-agricultural employment, ranges from 20 per cent in Armenia to 42 per cent in Thailand and more than 60 per cent in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam.⁶

10. Informal employment is a greater source of non-agricultural employment for women than for men in regions such as South Asia (83 per cent versus 82 per cent for men) and to a lesser extent in East and South-East Asia, excluding China (64 per cent for women versus 65 per cent for men).⁷ Estimates from individual countries show more variation in terms of sex-disaggregated distribution of labour in the informal economy. In Bangladesh, for example, women's informal employment as a percentage of non-agricultural employment is estimated at 91.3 per cent, compared to 86.6 per cent for men. In India, the rate for women is 88 per cent, whereas for men it is 84 per cent. Similarly, Nepal has one of the highest informal employment rates for women at 91.8 per cent compared to 83.8 per cent for men.⁸

11. As a result, most women in the region lack adequate social protection coverage, whether as mothers and primary caretakers, or breadwinners, or in old age. This is particularly concerning in a rapidly ageing region, where the oldest age cohorts are predominantly female and where older women in general have less education, fewer savings and are excluded from contributory pension systems, compared to older men.

3. **Women entrepreneurs: an important path to economic empowerment where gender-specific barriers remain**

12. Over the past 20 years, the number of women entrepreneurs has been increasing in some countries. In 2016, for example, the proportion of firms with female participation in ownership was 69 per cent in the Philippines, 64 per cent in Thailand and 51 per cent in Viet Nam.⁹ By setting up and managing a business, women can achieve economic independence, overcome poverty by building assets and improve the well-being of themselves and of their families and communities. Research in three countries found that, compared with male business owners, women business owners hired

⁶ Joann Vanek and others, "Statistics on the informal economy: definitions, regional estimates and challenges", Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) Working Paper (Statistics), No. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, WIEGO, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ILO and Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Women and Labour Markets in Asia: Rebalancing for Gender Equality* (Bangkok, 2011).

⁹ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2016* (Geneva, 2016).

17 per cent more women employees.¹⁰ Women also tend to use their incomes more productively; as one study shows, women devoted 90 cents of every dollar they earned on their families, including on children's education, health and nutrition, compared to 30–40 cents by men.¹¹

13. However, while entrepreneurs in general face considerable barriers, women entrepreneurs face additional disadvantages. These barriers include discriminatory sociocultural norms; policies and legislation that ignore the specific circumstances, needs and interests of women; limited opportunities for capacity development; and restricted access to finance, credit and information and communications technology (ICT). Such barriers jeopardize their capacity to grow and develop businesses and prevent them from fully participating in the economy and trade. As a result, they undermine the potential of women entrepreneurs to empower themselves and to foster growth, employment and poverty reduction in the Asia-Pacific region.

14. For instance, there is an estimated 61.3 million women entrepreneurs in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region,¹² and yet the proportion of women-owned micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises with access to finance averages only 5 to 6 per cent for microenterprises and 12 to 15 per cent for small firms.¹³ Studies suggest that closing the global credit gap for women-owned micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises by 2020 could increase average per capita incomes by approximately 12 per cent by 2030 across Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS countries) and the potentially high-growth economies of Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam in the ASEAN subregion.¹⁴

B. Systemic constraints holding women back in Asia and the Pacific

1. Educational attainment: the Asia-Pacific region shows progress in enrolment parity but entrenched biases and social norms persist

15. Education, especially at the secondary level, has been linked to positive outcomes for women and girls. Higher levels of education are also associated with narrowing the gender gap in access to formal employment and can enable women to access better-paid jobs. The Asia-Pacific region has made significant progress in achieving gender parity in primary education enrolment and is nearing parity at secondary and tertiary levels. Eight member States have achieved parity at all three levels. Except in South and South-West Asia,

¹⁰ Asia Foundation, *Access to Trade and Growth of Women's SMEs in APEC Developing Economies: Evaluating Business Environments in Malaysia – Philippines – Thailand* (San Francisco, California, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation secretariat, 2013).

¹¹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (Washington, D.C., 2011).

¹² ESCAP, *Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship in ASEAN: Transforming Prospects, Transforming Societies* (ST/ESCAP/2784).

¹³ US-ASEAN Business Alliance for Competitive Small and Medium Sized Enterprises and others, "Beyond AEC 2015: policy recommendations for ASEAN SME competitiveness" (n.p., 2014).

¹⁴ The Goldman Sachs Global Markets Institute estimates include Bangladesh, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Turkey. See Anna Stupnytska and others, "Giving credit where it is due: how closing the credit gap for women-owned SMEs can drive global growth" (New York, Goldman Sachs, 2014).

women now outnumber men in tertiary institutions, with a regional gender parity index of 1.07.¹⁵

16. The relationship between women's educational attainment and labour market outcomes, however, is not necessarily straightforward. While in developed countries a positive relationship between these two variables exists, in developing countries the relationship is more complex, and it has been observed that rising educational attainment is not the only factor needed to equalize disparities in the labour market. The persistent gender gap in labour force participation, for instance, points to additional dimensions and continued challenges. An example of continued challenges in education and the relationship with occupational segregation is the lack of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Enrolment statistics available for educational pathways show female representation is markedly low in those subjects. Female participation in those fields is often limited to certain disciplines. For instance, in Mongolia, 73 per cent of students enrolled in biology were female, while 23 per cent in engineering were.¹⁶ In addition, women researchers are scarce in South Asia, which, at a 17 per cent share of women researchers, has the lowest subregional representation.¹⁷

17. Drivers of this trend include persistent gender stereotypes in teaching and learning materials; limited gender-responsive career counselling and mentoring opportunities; fewer women role models; and psychosocial influences moulded by social norms and parental expectations.

2. Women's underrepresentation in senior management and on corporate boards

18. Data compiled in 2015 for 20 developing Asian economies showed that women made up 40 per cent of the workforce but only 14.4 per cent of corporate boardroom members and senior managers. In general, the share of women in top management in South-East Asia was above the Asian average, led particularly by the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.¹⁸

19. Several countries have progressive laws in place to promote women's corporate leadership. For example, in Malaysia in 2011, the Cabinet approved legislation requiring corporate companies to achieve at least 30 per cent representation of women in decision-making positions in the private sector. Meanwhile other countries in the region, such as Australia, Pakistan and Singapore, have adopted varied measures to increase the number of women in management, including corporate governance codes, codes of conduct, voluntary targets and cooperative initiatives between business and government.

20. However, a recent survey found – in line with the global situation – that the proportion of women decreases at each level of the management hierarchy,

¹⁵ ESCAP, Online Statistical Database. Available at http://data.unescap.org/escap_stat (accessed on 16 October 2018).

¹⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Korean Women's Development Institute, *A Complex Formula: Girls and Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in Asia* (Paris, UNESCO, 2015).

¹⁷ UNESCO, *UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030* (Paris, 2015). South Asia in the report corresponds to South and South-West Asia of the Commission's regional grouping, without India, the Islamic Republic of Iran or Turkey.

¹⁸ ADB, *Asian Development Outlook 2015 Update: Enabling Women, Energizing Asia* (Manila, 2015).

either because they have decided to leave or become stuck at a junior level.¹⁹ The glass ceiling which prevents women from reaching top positions is apparent, since data show that China, New Zealand and Viet Nam are the only countries in the region in which more than 5 per cent of publicly listed companies have women chief executive officers.

21. Moreover, there are also glass walls within hierarchical structures, which produce divergent career paths for men and women. The survey revealed that women tend to be concentrated in specific managerial functions such as human resources, public relations and communications, finance, and administration. Fewer companies have a high proportion of women in managerial functions such as operations and sales, research and product management, and general management – which form the basis of the essential management experience required to ascend to top positions.

22. The gender disparities are even more distinct when female senior management and boardroom representation is examined by sector. Female representation in corporate leadership presents a similar pattern to that of occupational segregation in the overall labour market – in those countries with data on the issue, women in boardrooms and top management are marginally better represented in services such as health care, education, public administration and real estate – although their share is still below 20 per cent.²⁰

23. Key barriers to women's leadership in management include the double burden of balancing work with family responsibilities – compounded by prejudicial gender stereotypes regarding women's labour market participation as well as by limited public policies and support services that foster an enabling environment, for example comprehensive social protection systems and childcare infrastructure. In addition, other challenges include the absence of inspiring women role models and the lack of networks to encourage women's career advancement.

3. Unpaid care work: a systemic constraint underpinning women's labour and time allocations

24. The unequal burden of unpaid care work – recognized as a key priority under target 5.4 in the 2030 Agenda – is a systemic barrier to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment all over the world and is a root cause of existing gender inequalities in the labour market. Unpaid work is work that produces goods and services for household consumption, which includes collecting firewood and fuel, fetching water, cooking, cleaning and providing care for children, older persons and other dependents. Women carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid household and care work in both developed and developing countries. In Asia and the Pacific women perform a significant share of unpaid care and domestic work, devoting between 2.4 and 6 hours on average, per day for unpaid work, while men spend between 18 minutes and 2.3 hours.²¹

¹⁹ ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, *Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, ILO, 2015).

²⁰ ADB, *Asian Development Outlook 2015 Update*.

²¹ United Nations, Statistics Division, Time use data portal. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/timeuse/index.html> (accessed on 16 October 2018).

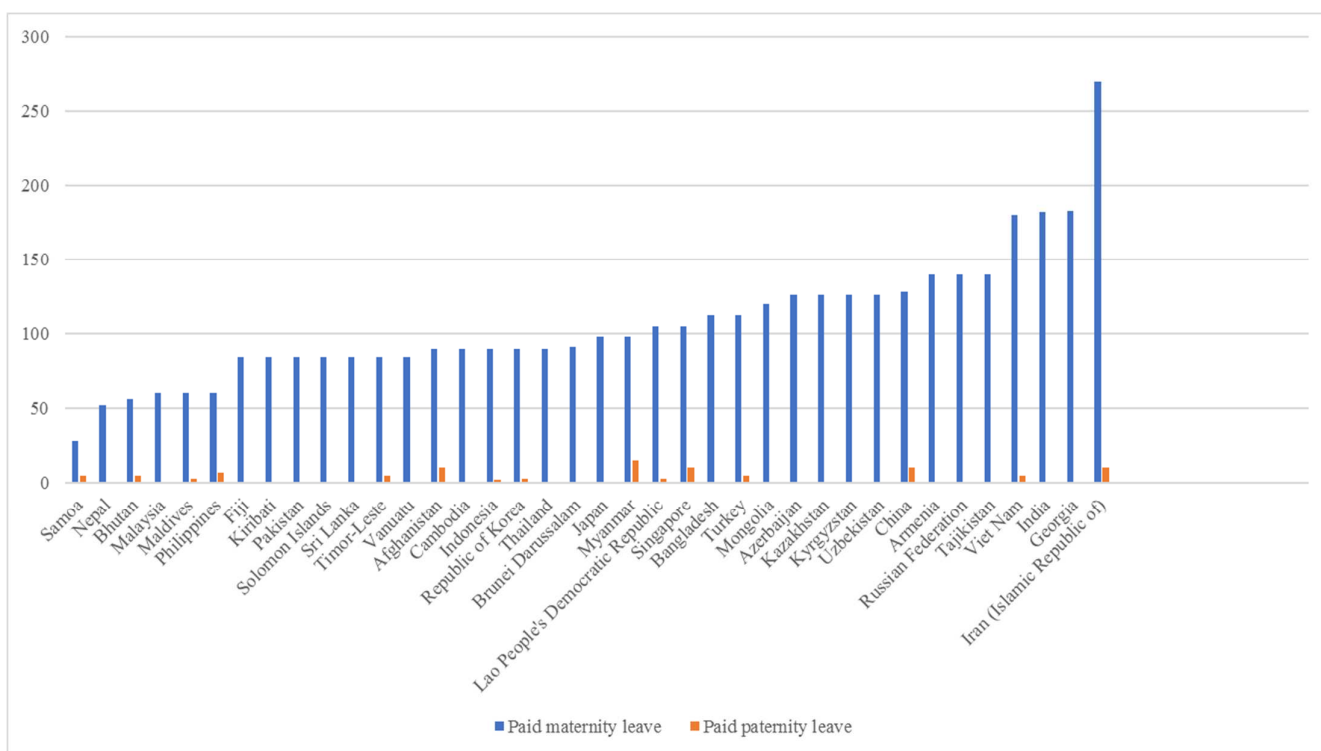
25. These disparities have multiple repercussions for women, societies and economies. At the individual level, unpaid care work impacts the ways in which women allocate their time and the types of jobs they can take. Due to their multiple responsibilities for unpaid care work, women may seek paid work that is more flexible, for fewer hours and closer to home – resulting in women’s segregation into the informal sector or into lower-paying jobs with little or no social protection. The hard labour done within the confines of the home is not counted in most national accounts, which reinforces gender roles and renders unpaid care work invisible for policymaking.

26. The equal sharing of responsibilities and the provision of infrastructure and social protection measures can play an important role in redressing unequal burdens of unpaid work, as is explicitly recognized in target 5.4. In the Asia-Pacific region, however, provisions to promote equal care responsibilities between men and women are still limited. Care leave policies vary widely and are usually limited to maternity leave for women. An analysis of laws in 45 countries in the region shows that five countries – the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea and Tonga – do not mandate either paid or unpaid maternity leave. Furthermore, in those countries that do mandate leave, 19 countries do not provide the minimum amount of 98 days of paid maternity leave recommended in the ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). The implication of these limited provisions is that when leave is too short, the probability of women dropping out of the workforce increases. Only 3 out of 10 mothers with newborns receive maternity benefits,²² leaving most women in the region without social protection for maternity, one of the basic social security guarantees of social protection floors. Among the same sample, paid paternity leave is scarce. Where it is available, fathers have very few days at their disposal after the birth of a child and in many cases, any leave they are able to take is unpaid (figure III).²³

²² ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017–19: Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva, 2017). See table B.6 in the annexes for further information.

²³ ESCAP calculations based on World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2018* database. Available at <http://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 12 October 2018).

Figure III
Number of paid maternity and paternity leave days mandated by law in Asia-Pacific countries, 2018

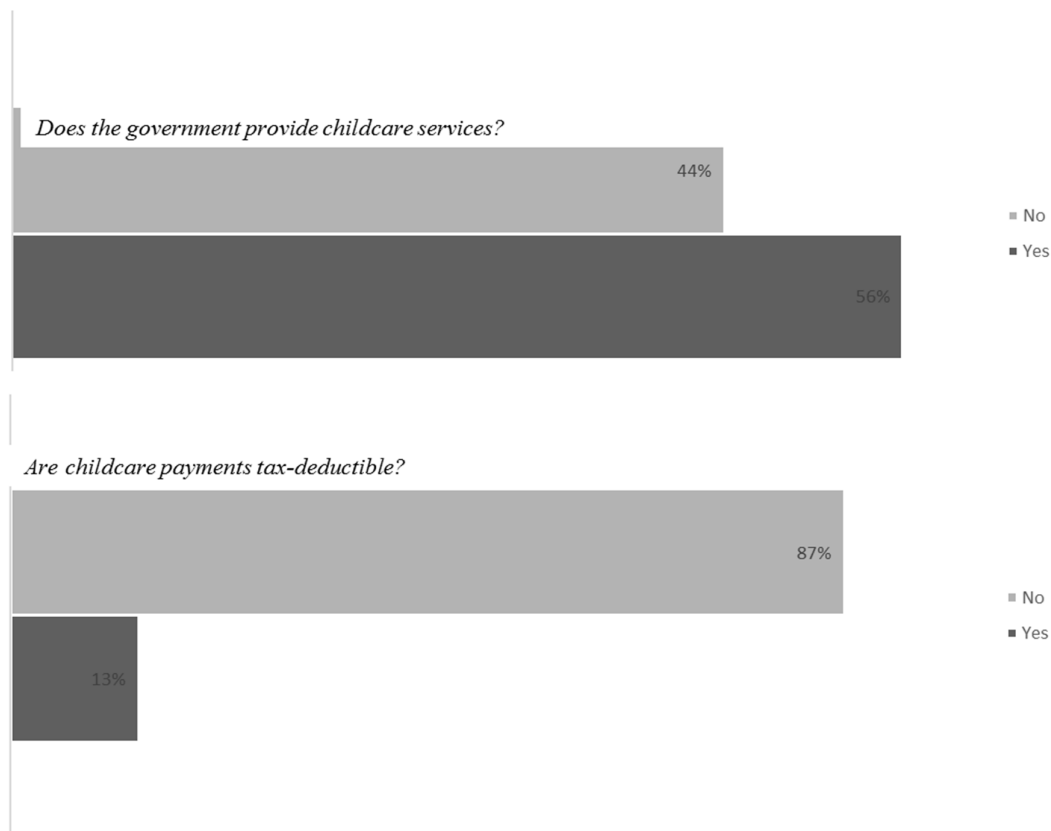


Source: World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2018 database. Available at <http://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 12 October 2018).

27. Of note is that a few countries in the region are shifting away from maternity and paternity leave in favour of paid parental leave available to both parents (namely, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea). Where parental leave exists, it is often taken mostly by mothers while fathers' take-up rate is low unless appropriate incentives are put in place.

28. For women to successfully join or stay in the work force after the birth of a child, apart from appropriate leave policies, adequate childcare options are necessary. Policies that assist in lowering the cost and increasing the availability and ease of childcare include income tax regulations to reduce the cost burdens as well as provisions for government-funded childcare or subsidies for private childcare services. Childcare provisions in 45 countries for which data are available show that slightly more than half of these countries have government-provided childcare services and only six countries allow for tax deductions for childcare costs (see figure IV).

Figure IV
Childcare benefits in Asia and the Pacific



Source: World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2018 database (see figure III).

4. Ownership of productive assets: women face considerable barriers to accessing land, property, financial services, and information and communications technology

29. Having access to land and property is important for women to exercise agency or control over their lives. Studies show that this leads to greater self-esteem among women as well as greater respect from other family members, better economic opportunities and greater mobility. There are long-run social returns as well, as it has been shown that greater access to land and housing for women is associated with better outcomes for girl children: higher survival rates, better nutrition and higher school attainment. Access to property can also provide women with the necessary collateral to start a business.

30. Gender inequalities regarding ownership of land, property and assets remain pervasive. Significantly, fewer women than men are agricultural landholders in several countries across the region, partly due to de jure and de facto restrictions on women’s access to and control of economic assets. In some countries in the region – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Malaysia, for example – the law does not guarantee the same inheritance rights to widows as to widowers or to daughters as to sons, with, in some instances, widows and daughters having no inheritance rights at all. In other countries, customary, traditional or religious practices discriminate against

widows and daughters despite laws guaranteeing them the same inheritance rights as men.²⁴

31. The issue of female ownership is closely intertwined with the types of property regimes in place with respect to marriage and inheritance. Some countries recognize community property, where most assets of a married couple, acquired during marriage, are considered jointly owned. Land and housing are usually the most prominent of such assets. Other countries consider all property as individually owned unless legal steps are taken to establish joint ownership. In the event of divorce, each partner has rights only to the assets they own separately. In general, women living in countries with community property regimes are more likely to report owning property than those living in individual or separate property regimes. Some countries have moved towards full community property regimes in order to promote gender equality in property ownership, even where this has meant going against custom and common practice. Where a move away from individual property regimes is difficult, it is still worth recognizing non-monetary contributions to household wealth and legislating that these be monetized and equally divided in case of divorce or death.

32. In the Asia-Pacific region, the most common type of property regime is separation of property (18 countries), where the original owner legally administers the marital property, followed by partial community property (16 countries), where assets acquired before the marriage are regarded as separate property and assets and income acquired after the marriage are regarded as joint property of the couple. Only one country in the region – the Philippines – has moved towards a full community property regime.²⁵

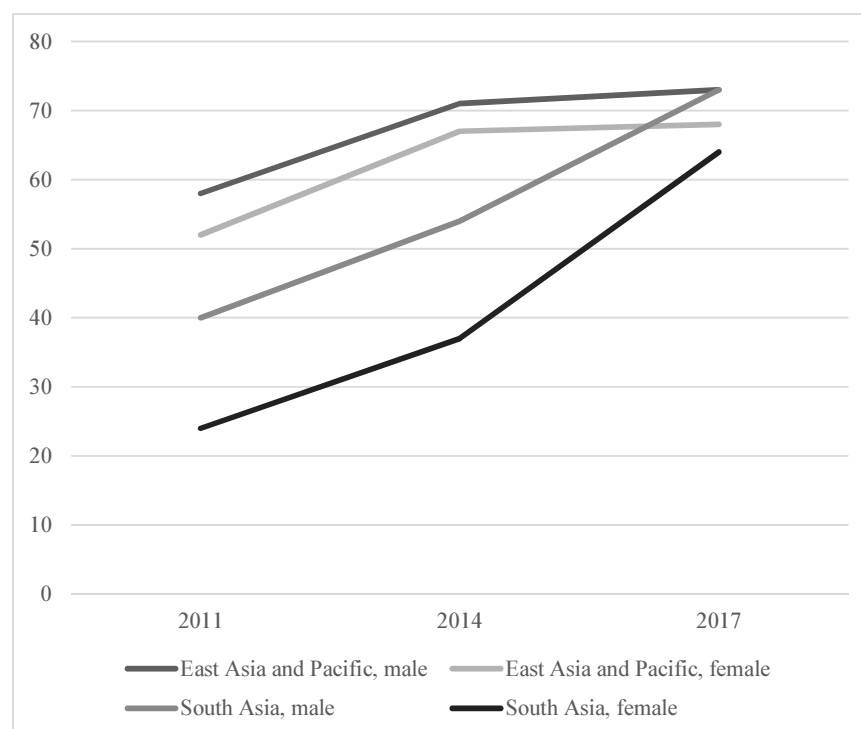
33. Another determinant of economic empowerment is access to financial services. The ability of women to have bank accounts and to save and borrow in their own name can affect the extent to which they can operate their own businesses and earn incomes, especially in contexts where wage employment may be hard to get.

34. Figure V shows gaps in access to financial services among men and women in East Asia and the Pacific and also South Asia with regard to ownership of an account in a financial institution – an indicator of financial access to formal financial services. While overall access to financial accounts for men and women is growing, the gender gap is still prevalent, especially in South Asia, where rates are much lower for women than men.

²⁴ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2018 database. Available at <http://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 12 October 2018).

²⁵ ESCAP calculations based on World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2018 database. Available at <http://wbl.worldbank.org/> (accessed on 12 October 2018).

Figure V
Account at a financial institution, by sex
 (Percentage)



Source: World Bank, Global Findex database. Available at https://globalfindex.worldbank.org/index.php/#data_sec_focus (accessed on 12 October 2018).

Note: Regional groupings used here as per definitions in the Global Findex database. The East Asia and the Pacific group excludes high-income countries.

35. Regarding savings and borrowing from financial institutions, overall rates are low in East Asia and the Pacific and also in South Asia. For savings in a financial institution, men show higher savings rates with a 6 per cent gender gap in East Asia and the Pacific and a 5 per cent gender gap in South Asia. Similarly, formal borrowing levels are low, with rates below 15 per cent overall. Growth rates for borrowing from financial institutions have remained stagnant in both regional groupings, with a gender gap of 3 per cent in both East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia.²⁶

36. ICT – which include the Internet and mobile phones – have emerged as powerful tools to deliver transformative services and unlock opportunities for men and women. The Internet can be leveraged to provide financial services to groups of people currently unserved and underserved by financial service providers, and barriers hindering women’s access to services can be overcome. Furthermore, mobile phones enable the provision of alternative financial services, including mobile money and mobile banking. In countries where mobile money is starting to take off, such as in Indonesia and Myanmar, leveraging this technology could assist women entrepreneurs in gathering

²⁶ Oliver Rowntree, “GSMA connected women: the mobile gender gap report 2018” (GSM Association, 2018)

funds more quickly and securely by receiving money from family and friends, a key source of funding for many entrepreneurs.

37. However, regional trends and available studies suggest that overall there is a gender divide that could be impacting women's ability to fully take advantage of ICT. Focusing on mobile technology and the mobile Internet, estimates show that South Asia has the largest gender inequalities, where the mobile ownership gender gap is estimated at 26 per cent and the gender gap in mobile Internet use stands at 70 per cent.²⁷ Other research shows that women are 12 percent less likely to be aware of emerging technologies.²⁸ In a study by the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development, it has been noted that there were very few efforts to support women entrepreneurs using ICT.²⁹

III. Strategies towards advancing women's economic empowerment

38. Promoting women's economic participation requires action in a range of areas, including the revision, adoption and enforcement of legislation that mandates equality of rights and opportunities for women and men; the implementation of measures that encourage balance between working life and family life, for women and men; gender-based budgeting to improve allocation of resources for women's economic empowerment programmes and policies; enhancing women's access to productive assets, including property and financial and digital assets; and tackling discriminatory social norms. More detail on these strategies is found below.

A. Ensuring equality of rights and opportunities for women and men

39. Eliminating discriminatory laws and ensuring equality of rights and opportunities is critical to advancing women's economic empowerment. Laws are a powerful reflection of a society's priorities. By guaranteeing equality of rights and protections for women and men and removing discriminatory provisions, Governments can take a first step in signalling their commitment to gender equality.

40. Equality in labour law is associated with more women working and earning more relative to men. However, several ESCAP member States still have gender-differentiated labour provisions, such as restrictions on women performing certain types of jobs. An analysis of 45 countries shows that 27 – a majority – have some form of restrictions that do not allow women to work in the same jobs as men. These restrictions include not being able to work the same night hours as men as well as not being able to work in factories or sectors such as mining, agriculture, construction, water, energy, transport and metalworking in the same way as men.

41. Workplace protections are another area where government action can reduce discrimination against women. Laws mandating non-discrimination based on gender in employment practices and equal remuneration for work of equal value can provide a framework to protect women workers. Of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Asia Foundation, *Access to Trade and Growth of Women's SMEs in APEC Developing Economies*.

²⁹ Thao Nguyen, *Scoping Study of Women's Entrepreneurship Development (WED) Interventions: Knowledge Gaps for Assessment of Project Performance* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Donor Committee for Enterprise Development, 2012).

45 countries in Asia and the Pacific, 64 per cent mandate non-discrimination based on gender in employment while almost none mandate equal remuneration for equal work (the exceptions are Australia, Bhutan, Kiribati, the Philippines, Samoa, Tajikistan, Turkey and Viet Nam). Therefore, ensuring equality in legislation in these areas is a clear first step towards improving protection for women in the region. Furthermore, it would comply with relevant ILO conventions and the Sustainable Development Goals.

42. Special attention should be paid to the informal sector and domestic workers, as this is where women tend to be concentrated in the labour force. Laws and regulations for workers in the informal sector should aim to decriminalize and destigmatize while respecting informal workers' rights and needs for social protection, access to public space as workspaces, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The challenges facing those making a livelihood in the informal economy were recognized at the annual ILO International Labour Conference. The Conference adopted Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204), on 12 June 2015, providing guidance to facilitate the transition of workers and economic units from the informal to the formal economy, while respecting workers' fundamental rights and ensuring opportunities for income security, livelihoods and entrepreneurship. While the causes of informality in each country are complex and context specific, adopting and implementing the guidance in the Recommendation as well as protections for domestic workers contained in the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), and Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201), are important actions to advance women's economic empowerment.

43. Strong, gender-sensitive social protection systems could provide a means to address some of the accumulated discrimination women suffer over their lives and strengthen equality of opportunity and rights for women and men. Regional cooperation towards achieving targets 1.3 and 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, with coordinated action between Governments, would enable Governments in Asia and the Pacific to address inequalities and to empower women and girls in the region.

B. Measures to promote work-life balance

1. Strategies to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work

44. To address the multiple dimensions embedded in unpaid care work, the concept of recognizing, reducing and redistributing can be adapted to develop context-specific solutions.³⁰ As a first step, it is critical for each country to understand the nature, consequences and full contributions that unpaid care work entails. Concrete actions for recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work include the actions detailed below.

45. Recognizing entails making the contributions of women visible by strengthening the funding for and capacity of statistical bureaus for data collection, particularly for time-use surveys.

³⁰ Diane Elson, "The three R's of unpaid work: recognition, reduction and redistribution", paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Unpaid Work, Economic Development and Human Well-being, United Nations Development Programme, New York, November 2008.

46. In addition, conducting studies to impute monetary value to unpaid care work, particularly its share in GDP, can be valuable. This could be a starting point to recognize the economic impact of women's unpaid care work.

47. For reducing, three strategies are worth highlighting. The first is to improve access to basic infrastructure to reduce time burdens related to accessing basic resources for household daily needs. For example, improving access to clean sources of water reduces the time spent collecting it and augments sanitation by decreasing burdens from water-borne diseases. Similarly, improving access to electricity and cooking technologies such as fuel-efficient cookstoves reduces the burden of biomass collection for household use. Investing in alternative energy sources, such as solar, biogas and wind energy, is an important opportunity to reduce time burdens while at the same time promoting more sustainable energy consumption.

48. The second strategy, which can be accomplished by improving the implementation of time-use surveys, is to collect information that shows the differences between women's and men's movement patterns and to adapt transportation infrastructure to better serve different populations, taking into particular consideration the needs of women and of rural populations, as they are often most in need of better transportation systems.

49. The third strategy is to examine public service provision through a gender lens to understand which key services could be implemented or improved to ease time burdens. Examples include improving administrative processes through ICT, making health and childcare services more accessible and responsive to women's needs, and assessing how schools can provide support services, such as school meals or after-school care.

50. Redistributing entails implementing measures to promote long-term normative change. At the core of unpaid care work inequality are social norms that prescribe gendered divisions of labour. This needs to change, but few policies and programmes have been implemented with this specific long-term aim. Measures that can redistribute the burdens of unpaid care work include the provision of parental leave (for fathers and mothers) and affordable childcare services.

51. Furthermore, a gender-sensitive approach to social protection, and in particular social protection floors, is necessary to promote gender equality and address women's specific needs. For instance, the accumulation of pension contributions during leave periods can play a key role in the recognition and valuing of women's and men's care work. In addition to valuing care work it can also reduce the disparity in old-age pension levels due to a parent's absence from the labour force owing to childcare responsibilities.

2. Boosting public investment in social care service infrastructure

52. A social care service infrastructure is defined as a network of institutions and professional services that support the provision of care. These services include childcare centres, day care, preschools and after-school programmes as well as residential care for older persons and services for people with disabilities. Public investment in the social care service infrastructure is not only critical to support the redistribution and reduction of unpaid care work but it can also have multiplier effects, by creating decent jobs, particularly for women.

53. For this, State intervention and financing are key. Markets in care services, if left alone, are prone to perpetuating social inequalities. Social care services tend to have high costs and low profit margins, making it an unappealing venture for private capital. For families, the high costs of these services and the option of having unpaid caregivers at home make market substitutes unattractive, except for families who can afford to pay. These dynamics exacerbate social inequalities as it is women in the wealthier segments of society that are able to pay for quality care services and go back to the labour force, while women who cannot afford market substitutes cannot free their time towards the pursuit of different options. For care receivers, especially children, differential access to quality care also has serious implications. Lack of access to good, early childhood development services and quality care has been linked to differences in school performance that further translate into unequal labour market outcomes and pay.

54. Investing in the social care infrastructure could entail providing public services directly or subsidizing and regulating the provision of private care. The critical challenge in building the infrastructure, independent of its ultimate design, is the allocation of sufficient public resources to achieve universal coverage. To finance a social care service infrastructure at the national level requires significant investments, in a climate where there are multiple claims to limited public funds. However, such investments can have multiple positive economic returns, including the high potential for decent employment creation, particularly for women.

55. A concrete policy action on this front is to strengthen the capacity of governments to assess the costs and returns of public investments in social care infrastructure. In this regard, policy simulations to understand the potential costs of expanding the social care infrastructure based on projected care needs could provide estimates for multiple outcomes, such as the potential for employment creation, poverty reduction and unpaid care work reduction. Studies to assess such policy interventions so far have shown that social care expansion has superior impacts on employment generation, poverty reduction and gender equality when compared, for instance, with similar investments in physical infrastructure.³¹

3. Improving allocation of resources using gender-responsive budgeting

56. Gender-responsive budgeting has been recognized as a catalyst for achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal 5, but the 2030 Agenda as a whole. It is a strategy to promote gender equality by paying attention to government finances with regard to raising revenue and spending. Specifically, it entails an analysis of the gender-differentiated impact of budgets and a process of adjusting budgetary decision-making and priorities, in accordance with the different needs of women and men. Gender-responsive budgeting recognizes that budgets are not neutral, as policies and how they are funded have different and unequal impacts on women and men. It does not mean a separate budget for women and men and does not necessarily aim to increase the amount spent on women – but it may involve increasing spending in specific sectors that benefit women and girls and reduce inequality.

57. Innovative strategies for adopting and implementing gender-responsive budgeting have emerged in the Asia-Pacific region. In Indonesia, the process

³¹ Ipek Ilkharacan, *Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment: Recognizing and Investing in the Care Economy* (New York, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), 2018).

was initiated through a presidential instruction on gender mainstreaming in 2000, accompanied by the inclusion of gender indicators in the national development plan and a planning and budgeting policy (2009 to the present). Gender-responsive programmes were developed based on a comprehensive gender analysis, reviewed by the National Development Planning Agency and the subsequent production of a gender budget statement – comprising a gender situation analysis, objectives, an action plan, activities and associated budgetary allocations, outputs, performance indicators and anticipated impacts. To date, 28 of 38 ministries have adopted gender-responsive planning and budgeting, with 33 provinces and 20 per cent of all districts/municipalities also following this approach. The key success factors of the application of gender-responsive budgeting in Indonesia include (a) its institutionalization at national and local levels, with engagement of women and senior male public servants and office holders; (b) the multisectoral coordination and planning enabled by the Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee; (c) strategic partnerships; and (d) budget statements that include qualitative and quantitative information.³²

58. In the Philippines, the current gender and development budget policy has evolved from a series of legislative mandates, including the Magna Carta of Women (2009) which requires all government agencies to allocate at least five per cent of their budgets to address gender issues –with the intention that the 5 per cent will influence the remaining 95 per cent. In addition, agencies are required to produce annually a gender and development plan and budget, as well as a report. Technical support and capacity-building assistance is provided to agencies by the Philippine Commission on Women through training events, workshops, advisory services and written guidelines. Aside from the Commission, oversight agencies for the implementation of the gender and development budget policy include the Department of Budget and Management, the Department of the Interior and Local Government, the National Economic and Development Authority and the Commission on Audit. Moreover, one unique feature of gender-responsive budgeting in the Philippines is the implementation of gender audits as part of the mainstream audit processes, accompanied by strict measures for non-compliance. The Government of the Philippines has also taken steps to promote gender-responsive budgeting at the subnational level, including through the provision of technical assistance on conducting gender analyses of the socioeconomic situations of local government unit catchment areas and integrating sex-disaggregated data into local planning and budgeting.³³

4. Enhancing access to productive assets

59. The importance of having access to productive assets has been recognized in Sustainable Development Goal 5, in which Member States committed to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services and inheritance rights.

60. Women often encounter legal and regulatory social barriers that restrict their ability to own assets, enter into contracts and obtain credit. The implementation of reforms granting equal access to assets for women and men is uneven across the region. Regulations still limit asset or land acquisitions to heads of households and requirements that husbands or male family members

³² ESCAP, “Gender-responsive budgeting in Asia and the Pacific: key concepts and good practices” (Bangkok, 2018).

³³ Ibid; and Sheena Kanwar, *Gender Responsive Budgeting in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Status Report* (Bangkok, UN-Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2016).

co-sign add extra burdens to already lengthy and complex application procedures. To reduce these burdens, reducing discriminatory laws and practices and tapping into innovative approaches to reduce barriers for women is imperative. In India, for example, many State governments provided concessions in stamp duty for women-owned properties, which has contributed to a significant increase in women's asset ownership. Developing tax incentives for financial institutions that provide credit to women entrepreneurs is another example of policy initiatives to reduce the financial barriers women face.

61. Finally, it will be important to fully leverage the potential of ICT to assist in the reduction of gender barriers. For example, digital financial services have the potential to decrease the gender gap in women's participation in the financial system. To further support women's equal access to digital assets, laws, policies and regulations should be designed to support digital inclusion. Measures to improve Internet affordability, for example, should be considered, including public subsidies, reduced pricing or free access.

5. Tackling adverse social norms

62. The systemic constraints discussed in the present document highlight how gender norms and stereotypes effect unequal outcomes in education, employment, leadership positions and access to productive resources, all of which have a bearing on women's economic empowerment. Tackling adverse social norms is critical to bring about transformative changes in women's economic empowerment.

63. Evidence suggests that the strategies mentioned earlier are themselves drivers of social norm change (for example, legal reform and access to assets).³⁴ However, it is important to develop strategies to address norms directly on multiple fronts and different levels and not just as stand-alone interventions.

64. Among the most effective strategies to change social norms is work with children and adolescents. Programmes implemented in schools, such as the Gender Equity Movement programme in India, use role playing, interactive activities and lessons on gender-based violence to challenge discriminatory gender norms. Other programmes encourage girls and women to consider non-traditional occupations, and the strategy of sharing information about the higher wages in these fields has shown success. Initiatives to encourage women to enter science, technology, engineering and mathematics have also gained momentum, including programmes such as Girls Who Code and Cisco Women's Action Network, which target young women.

65. Other successful strategies include supporting role models in different arenas, such as in public life and in business. These strategies may include establishment of quotas, both in government representation and in corporate structures to encourage more women to join and rise to leadership positions.

66. Finally, it is important to involve men in efforts to advance social norm change, especially in regard to stopping violence against women. This requires engaging men at multiple levels, from conducting workshops and holding dialogues at the community level all the way up to corporate and public leadership to foster the engagement of male champions. Examples of initiatives

³⁴ United Nations, High-level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, "Leave no one behind: a call to action for gender equality and women's economic empowerment" (New York, 2016).

in this area include Male Champions of Change in Australia, which targets peer groups of influential male leaders to act as advocates for gender equality.

67. To conclude, promoting women's economic empowerment has the potential to advance the Sustainable Development Goals and to support inclusive sustainable development. Closing the gender gap in economic participation can also boost regional economies and provide women with economic opportunities. Doing so, however, requires concerted action in a wide range of areas, from changing discriminatory legislation, to implementing measures for work-life balance and gender-based budgeting, enhancing women's access to productive assets and tackling discriminatory social norms. In this regard, ESCAP provides a vital regional platform for enhancing regional cooperation and promoting good practices and effective strategies to bring about transformative changes in support of gender equality and the empowerment of women. In collaboration with the United Nations system, including UN-Women, ESCAP also supports member States in developing comprehensive policy initiatives to advance women's economic empowerment and gender-responsive budgeting for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

IV. Issues for consideration by the Committee on Social Development

68. The Committee on Social Development is invited to provide the secretariat with guidance on its future work on women's economic empowerment. In view of the issues presented in the document, the Committee may wish to deliberate on the following topics:

- (a) National policy frameworks and mechanisms to enhance women's economic empowerment;
 - (b) Effective strategies to promote women's entrepreneurship as an important path to women's economic empowerment;
 - (c) Inclusive social protection measures that promote gender equality and address women's specific needs;
 - (d) Policy measures to recognize, reduce and redistribute the unpaid work of women;
 - (e) Policy approaches to promote the application of gender-responsive budgeting in national contexts;
 - (f) Areas for future research, policy development and capacity-building in support of women's economic empowerment.
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